

THE ARGOSY.

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A GUILTY SILENCE.

CHAPTER XLII.

EVE WARRINER.

WHEN twelve hours had passed after the posting of the two letters, Trix began to listen anxiously for the cab that was to bring Margaret from the station. Or, perhaps, one of them might first write—either her husband or her sister; and every time she heard the postman in the street, her heart gave a little leap, and she tried to nerve herself in anticipation of the letter which she felt almost sure he must have for her. So the first day passed away, and the second day, and the third; but no cab stopped at Mrs. Clemson's door, neither did the postman leave any letter for the young wife lying upstairs with clasped hands and beating heart, and waiting, with a desperate patience on her white face, for the missive that was not yet written.

When the third day came to an end, and brought her no news, Trix said to herself, "They have renounced me. They have given me up, one and all. They will have nothing further to do with me. Well, if they can live without me, I must try whether I cannot live without them."

All that night she lay awake, crying softly to herself. But just as the first grey streaks of the winter morning were making themselves apparent in the sky, she fell into a quiet, dreamless sleep, as soft and refreshing as that of a child. She awoke about ten o'clock, to find Mrs. Clemson by her bedside, quietly stirring a cup of tea.

"Well, how are we this morning? A little better, unless I am much mistaken. Now, here's a nice cup of tea, just sweetened to your liking. Try to drink it; it will do you good."

Trix sat up in bed, and put her arm round the old lady's neck, and drew her face close to her own, and kissed her.

"I will eat or drink anything you bring me," she said, "for I want to get well as soon as possible. And there is something else I want, and that is, to learn how to make artificial flowers. I want to earn my own living, be it ever such a poor one."

"If you want to learn how to make artificial flowers," said Mrs.

Clemson, "Eve shall give you some lessons—that is, when you are a good deal stronger than you are now. But as to earning your living by it, that is easier said than done. But it will be time enough to talk about this in another fortnight. What you have got to do now is just to eat and drink as much as you can, and not bother your head about anything."

Not bother her head about anything! Good homely advice, no doubt, if she could only have acted on it.

On the seventh day after sending off her first letter, a sudden fit of impatience came over her, and she wrote to her husband a second time, but in no yielding mood. She also began a second letter to her sister; but after writing half-a-dozen lines, she tore it up and thrust it into the fire.

"I had a sister Madge once, who loved me better than all the world beside," she said bitterly to herself. "Now, I have only Mrs. Bruhn, of Brook Lodge, for a sister, and that makes all the difference. Not till she has answered my first letter will I write to her again."

Her letter to her husband ran thus:—

"When I wrote to you a week ago, I informed you that my sister, Mrs. Bruhn, could furnish you with my address. As you have not thought well to communicate with me since that time, I can only conclude it to be your wish that henceforth we shall be as strangers to each other. I am quite content that such should be the case, since it would appear that you either cannot or will not give me such an explanation of your conduct as, in my position as your wife, I have a right to look for at your hands. It may be that your conduct admits of no explanation. Such is the only construction I can put upon your silence. In that view of the case, I ask only that we may never meet again.

"And so—farewell.

"B. R."

This letter, as we have already seen, met with a like fate to the first one. It never reached the hands of Hugh Randolph, and Trix waited in vain for a reply.

In the breaking away of all the ties of her former life, and in the loneliness of heart to which she was now condemned, Trix felt her-
drawn gradually closer to her new friend, Eve Warriner. Eve's sympathy was so unobtrusive, and yet so genuine—for Trix had given her an outline of her story—that the doctor's young wife must have been made of far sterner stuff than she was had she not felt touched and cheered by it. Without knowing anything of Eve's history, Trix felt instinctively that it must be a sad one; that her own sorrows had taught her to open her heart to the sorrows of others; and that between herself and the world's afflicted ones there was a subtle chord of sympathy which brought them into union one with the other, making her the confidant of the troubles of all with whom she came in contact. During the worst part of Trix's illness, Eve had

shared with Mrs. Clemson the task of nursing her ; and now that her strength was coming back from day to day, and the time of nursing had gone by, Eve still spent many hours in Trix's room, working busily at her flowers meanwhile, talking or silent, according to the mood in which the invalid might happen to be. That delicate assimilation of her own mood to that of others was, perhaps, one great reason why she was liked so well by all who knew her.

"What a good woman Mrs. Clemson must be !" said Trix one day to Eve after a long silent pause, during which she had been thinking deeply. "The goodness of her heart seems to shine out through every action of her life."

"She *is* a good woman," answered Eve emphatically, "as no one has better reasons than myself for knowing. Had it not been for her, I should have been lying at this moment in a nameless grave, the victim of my own rash act."

"You !" exclaimed Trix in astonishment.

"I," answered Eve calmly. Her nimble fingers ceased their movements for a minute or two. She sat in silence, gazing into vacancy. Then breaking up her reverie with a sigh, she turned a smiling face on Trix. "It does me good now and then to talk about myself," she said ; "it seems to relieve the fulness that I sometimes feel just here," and she pressed her hand to her heart ; "so I now propose to tell you the story of a naughty girl.

"My father was, and is, a country parson," began Eve, "and I am an only child. I lived a very happy life at the little parsonage till I was eighteen years old, and had not a care, a hope, or an ambition, beyond the moss-grown walls of its garden. We were not very rich, but we had enough for our simple wants, and something over for the poor. After a time, some one came and told me that he loved me, and I thought that I loved him in return ; but it was liking, not love, that I felt for him, as I afterwards discovered to my bitter cost. He pressed me to become his wife, and I consented. My father made no difficulty from the first. The wedding-day was fixed, and all arrangements made, when I went to spend the last fortnight of my unmarried life at the house of an aunt, who lived thirty miles away in another county. What followed is not difficult to guess. When at my aunt's, I met with a second some one whom I could and did not bear to dwell on the details of the sweet, hateful story. It is enough to say that his promises made me forget everything else. We were quietly married one morning at a little church three miles away across the fields. He brought an elderly friend who gave me away, and who passed for my uncle. That night I left my aunt's house for ever, and joined my husband at the nearest railway station. I wrote to my father, I wrote to the man I had so cruelly jilted. I told both of them what I had done, and prayed their forgiveness.

"My husband and I went to a little town in the south of France

and then followed six happy, happy months. My husband was fond of me in his own careless indifferent fashion, and that was all I asked. He was one of the most changeable of mortals; and I suppose that, in time, his love for me would have burnt itself out, and my dream of happiness would have come to an end that way. The waking, however, came after a different fashion. He had gone away with a French friend for a few days' fishing. While he was from home, a letter from England came through the post to his address; it was marked *immediate and important*, and the words were underlined. I was utterly at a loss where to find my husband; he never made me the confidant of his movements whenever he went from home on any of his sporting excursions. Thinking that there might perhaps be something in the letter that I could reply to in his absence, and that, in any case, no harm could result, I opened it. It proved to be from my husband's man of business, informing him that the younger of his two children was dead, and that *his wife* being unacquainted with his address, had applied to him—the lawyer—to inform her husband of the fact. 'Her husband! then what is he to me, and what am I to him?' was the first question I asked myself. When Ralph came back, which he did next day, it was the first question I put to him. He took the whole matter very coolly, as he did everything in life.

"'You are rightly served,' he said, 'for opening a letter that did not belong to you.'

"I think the next half-hour was the bitterest of my life. I got the whole story from him by dint of questioning, for he would not tell me anything of his own accord. He had been married ten years when I first knew him, but had not lived with his wife for more than half that time. He was a man who would let nothing stand in the way of his own ends. Rather than lose me—his whim for the time being—he chose to commit bigamy. This he acknowledged with the utmost frankness, in answer to my questions, saying, 'If ever I return to England, dear child, you can have me arrested for bigamy, and take your revenge out of me that way.' But he knew very well that I should do nothing of the kind. Well, to shorten a long story, it will be sufficient to say, that on the evening of that same day I left him. Now that I knew my position in relation to him, I would not stay another hour. He tried, in his languid *far niente* way, to induce me not to leave him; but I have sometimes thought since that he was rather pleased than otherwise, to be so easily rid of a toy of which he had already begun to tire. Be that as it may, I found myself in London three days later, and in all the great city there was not a soul that I knew. By this time my money was nearly exhausted, but in my travelling case I found a purse containing twenty sovereigns, which Ralph had put there unknown to me. I went to a quiet and inexpensive hotel, and wrote to my father and my aunt; but my aunt had died while I was abroad, and my father refused to

even answer my letters. Other relatives in the world I had none. Again and again I wrote to my father, but all to no purpose. His stern sense of right and wrong would not allow him to pardon in one of his own kin what he would have been one of the first to condone in the case of a stranger. Week by week my little store of money dwindled to a smaller sum, but I was utterly apathetic in this and every other matter; utterly regardless as to what should become of me. At length the day came when I was called upon to change my last shilling. I shook hands with the landlady of the hotel, and bade her farewell, telling her that my two boxes would be sent for; then putting on my bonnet and shawl, I wandered out into the streets. It was in the spring of the year; the days were warm and dry, but the nights were still keen and frosty. What happened to me during the next four or five days I can scarcely remember. I walked about the streets all day, and passed my nights on a bench in one of the parks. I lived on bread and water while my few coppers lasted, but when my last penny was gone, water alone was all I had. This could not last long, so, on the evening of the second day that I had been without food, and when my hunger had become almost unbearable, instead of going to the park, I made my way down towards the river. After a time I found myself crouched in a dim corner near one of the bridges, but have no recollection of how I got there. My fixed determination was to end everything that night by a leap into the cold, dark flood, in whose swirl and lap and wash there was a whisper of oblivion—a murmur of the sleep that knows no waking.

“By-and-by, when one of the great clocks near at hand had told eleven, and one by one the busy noises of the day were dying out, I crawled out of my lair, and making my way up one or two narrow deserted streets, I found myself in a little while on the bridge itself. The leap from its parapet, so I calculated, would deaden sensation before I should touch the water, and make death easier. I began to pace the bridge, thinking of my past life as I did so; but it was chiefly the old time at home, when I was a careless happy girl, that my thoughts ran on, and of the stern grey-haired man living out his lonely life at the little parsonage among the hills. Had all the world been mine at that moment, I would gladly have given it for one kiss from his lips and one word of forgiveness. At length the half-hour was chimed by the same clock that I had heard before. ‘One short fifteen minutes more, and then I shall cease to suffer,’ I said to myself. ‘When the quarter before midnight chimes, I will hesitate no longer.’

“As it seemed to me, the words had hardly gone from my lips, when the slow musical chimes broke the quiet of the great bridge yet once again, and I felt that my time had come. I looked around. The night was very dark, and the far-apart lamps seemed to struggle ineffectually against the blackness. For the moment I seemed to be utterly alone. No sound of approaching footsteps broke the stillness.

I took off my bonnet and laid it on the parapet; I bound up my hair, and tied my shawl firmly round my waist. My foot was on the topmost ledge, and in another second I should have been over, when I felt my gown clutched at from behind, and a woman's voice said, 'What are you doing here at this time of night? Come down, or I will call the police.' I stepped down on to the pavement, and tried to free myself from her grasp, but she held me fast. 'Let me go,' I said. 'You mind your business, and leave me to mind mine.'— 'This is my business, or at least I shall make it so,' said the woman firmly. 'Come quietly with me, or I shall put you into the hands of the police.' She placed my hand within her arm, and drew me off the bridge. 'Rash girl! Do you know what it is that you were about to do?' she said when we had got into the streets. 'Yes, I was about to put an end to my troubles,' I said sulkily; 'and but for you they would have been all over by this time.'—Your earthly troubles would have been over; but the trouble that never endeth, the trouble that lasts through eternity, might perhaps have begun. Where is your home, and who are your parents?'—'I have neither,' I answered.—'For to-night you shall go with me to my home. In the morning we will talk over your affairs, and see what had best be done for you.' She brought me home to this house, and here I have been ever since."

There were tears in Trix's eyes as Eve Warriner finished her narrative.

"*My* troubles seem heavy to bear," she said; "but how much heavier must yours have been! How long have you lived with Mrs. Clemson?"

"Nearly two years, and during that time I have 'healed me of my wounds.' The scars remain, and always will do, but the old bitter smart has died out, and again it seems a pleasant thing to live."

"But still your life must be a very lonely one," urged Trix. "You are so superior in every way to those——"

Eve held up her hand.

"Don't talk in that strain, please," she said. "In what way are either you or I superior to Mrs. Clemson? We may be more highly educated, our intellectual needs may be greater; but her noble heart, so full of true Christian charity, redeems—nay, far more than redeems—every other deficiency."

"I am rightly rebuked," said Trix. "Mrs. Clemson has a heart of gold. Such as she make the salt of the earth."

"Your occasion for saying so would be still greater if you knew as much as I know of her private life, and of the good she does by stealth."

"And have you quite forgotten the past?" asked Trix. "Does it never rise unbidden in your memory like a ghost?"

"Often and often," answered Eve. "No, the past will not let itself be forgotten. It comes like an importunate beggar knocking at the gates of

Memory. But I will not give way to it more than I can possibly help. I find that the best remedy for keeping my thoughts from wandering far afield is to keep my fingers well employed."

"Your remedy shall be mine," said Trix, "as soon as ever I shall have gained a little more strength."

"This has been a happy month for me," said Eve smilingly. "It has given me a friend"—here she bent over, and kissed Trix fondly; "and it has given me back the love of my father."

"Your father! Have you seen him?" said Trix eagerly.

"I have," answered Eve. "I was down at home—at the dear old parsonage—when you first came here. Yes, my father has forgiven me; and the full meaning of the words can be known to those alone who have sinned as I have sinned. I know that his love has been mine from the first, that his heart has never been estranged from me; and now I feel that not contentment merely, but happiness, may again be mine."

"Your words are like medicine to my soul," said Trix. "I feel that even in my case there may be hope."

"Hope on, hope ever," answered Eve earnestly. "Let that be your motto. I can see the truth of it now, although there was a time when such words would have seemed to me like so many unmeaning sounds. But I have not yet told you to what especial means I owe my reconciliation with my father. I owe it to the kind offices of the man to whom I was once engaged to be married—of him whom I so cruelly jilted. By some means it came to his knowledge that I had left my husband. Once, when I was at my wretchedest, he saw me in the middle of a London crowd; but before he could reach me I had disappeared. I saw him, and fled from him as though he were one who had sworn to take my life. But he would not lose me thus easily. He could not look for me himself, but he paid others to do so for him,—men accustomed to such tasks. I was found at last, and he (I will not mention his name) came to see me. He was not long in discovering that the great unhappiness of my life arose from my father's refusal to be reconciled to me. He undertook to bring us together again, and he succeeded. The utmost concession that he could induce papa to make was granting me permission to write to him. But he was not satisfied with that. He took me down to the parsonage, and opening the door of the room in which papa was sitting alone, busy with his next Sunday's sermon, he pushed me in, and shut us up together. It was a bold *ruse*, but it was a successful one. Poor papa capitulated, and in two minutes was calling me by the old pet name that I knew myself by before I knew that I had any other."

"And yet you never really loved this true-hearted man?" said Trix.

"No, I never really loved him," answered Eve, "except as I might love a brother, or a very dear friend. And he—well, I have good reason to know that he has long got over his youthful passion for me,

and is happy in other ties. To me he has been true-hearted in the noblest sense of the word, returning good for evil, and winning back a father's love when I thought I had lost it for ever. A good and noble man in every way is Hugh Randolph."

"Who?" gasped Trix, while a death-like pallor overspread her face. "I did not hear the name aright."

"Hugh Randolph is the name. I did not intend to mention it even to you, but it slipped off my tongue before I was aware. By profession he is a surgeon, and lives at Helsingham, a little town over a hundred miles from here."

"Then you are the veiled woman whom I saw him with at King's Cross a month ago. He and you went away together by train."

"We did. It will be just a month ago to-morrow since he took me back to my father. But how strangely you look at me! What do you know of Dr. Randolph? Are you a relative of his?"

"Only his wife," murmured Trix almost inaudibly.

CHAPTER XLIII.

FOUND.

To Hugh Randolph in his deserted home one dreary day passed after another without bringing him any tidings of his missing wife. Both for him and to Mrs. Bruhn this was a period of utter wretchedness. The inactivity to which they were condemned, the waiting for tidings that never came, lent an additional pang to what they might otherwise have felt. A day never passed without either Hugh walking up to Brook Lodge, or Margaret going down to the doctor's house. Mr. Bruhn was full of the warmest and most generous sympathy, and placed himself and his purse unreservedly at Hugh's command. Had assistance, either personal or pecuniary, been of any avail in the matter, Mr. Bruhn would have shrunk from no sacrifice however great.

There was another member of the family, Mr. Davenant, to wit. On the first evening after hearing of the disappearance of Trix, he broke down suddenly while playing in the overture to the burlesque, and was obliged to leave the theatre. Next day, he sent in his resignation, and at the end of the week he set out for Helsingham, where he was cordially welcomed by Mr. Bruhn. Under other circumstances, to have been so welcomed, and in such a house, would have made the old rover happy for ever; but his youngest daughter was gone, no one knew whither, and he had never felt till now how closely the fibres of his heart had twined themselves around her. He derived very little pleasure from his new clothes, or even from the choice cigars of which he was now at liberty to smoke as many as he pleased. Day by day he seemed to grow more silent and melancholy, and went mooning about the little town, heedless of everything and everybody;

haunting the telegraph office hour after hour, being possessed by a vague half-formed idea that it must of necessity be the place to which some tidings of his lost darling must first come.

The scheme devised by Charlotte Herne for rendering the breach between Hugh Randolph and his wife an irreparable one, had, so far, proved entirely successful. The only two letters written by Trix had passed into her hands and been destroyed, and any others that might be sent would probably meet with a similar fate. If Trix relied on letter-writing alone as a means of bringing about a reconciliation with her husband, the foundation on which she built her hopes was a poor one indeed. In any case, she, Charlotte, was determined to keep the two apart so long as it lay in her power to do so. The chapter of accidents might, perhaps, end in favour of her scheme. Events might so fall out as to preclude her hated rival from ever again seeking the shelter of her husband's roof. Every day that Trix remained away was one more point added in Charlotte's favour, and lessened the chance of the difference between husband and wife ever working itself out to a happy ending.

Charlotte found that she had little power over Hugh, as in the old time before his marriage, to charm away his melancholy, or lighten the evening hours when he came home, tired and dull, after a hard day's work. He was wounded too deeply for any simple touch of hers to be of avail. Still, her unspoken sympathy with him in his trouble, showing itself as it did in many different ways, was not without its effect upon his mind, although he himself might be hardly conscious of it. "Any news to-day, Hugh?" she would ask of him every evening when he came home.

"None whatever, Charlotte," he would answer, well knowing what she meant. As he spoke he could see the little hopeful smile with which she had awaited his answer fade off her face. She would sigh gently, her beautiful eyes would dim with tears, and a soft cloud of melancholy would settle round her; and Hugh would feel himself drawn nearer to her than he had ever been in his life before. Then, her deft, noiseless way of going about her household duties, which, now that Trix was no longer here, she had resumed, and even the low, monotonous tones of her voice, had a soothing effect upon his overstrained nerves.

But Hugh's misery was not to last for ever. It came to a sudden ending, and in this wise. One morning, several days after Charlotte's adventure in the garden, he was much later than usual at breakfast, having been called away from home at an early hour. When he entered the room, Charlotte was not there, having been specially sent for half an hour ago by Mrs. Sutton. But his letters were there, and he pounced on them at once; for, notwithstanding the time that had passed since Trix's leaving home, he was not able to rid himself of the hope that she would some day write to him. His letters this morning had been duly examined by Tib, and passed without

suspicion. Tib declared, and truly, that there was no letter addressed in the peculiar hand which she had been taught to detect and pick out; but there was one in another hand—a letter from Eve Warriner—that at once scattered Charlotte's edifice to the winds.

Hugh recognised the writing in a moment, but he put the letter on one side for a time, and did not open it till he had nearly finished breakfast, and then only with that amount of languid interest, which was all that he now seemed to have at command, even for matters that had at one time appeared to him of the greatest moment. But when his eye took in the contents of the note, he felt as if his senses had suddenly deserted him. The note ran thus:—

“Dear Mr. Randolph,—Your wife is here, under this roof, and has been here since the evening when you and I went down to Etwold together. I did not discover the identity of Mrs. Randolph with your wife till a few minutes ago, so could not write earlier. She has been very ill, but is better now. She has been the victim of a most unfortunate error; but it will be impossible for you to judge her otherwise than lovingly when you shall have heard all particulars. Come without a moment's delay. Mrs. Randolph herself has written to you twice, but, as you have not in any way noticed her letters, she lives in dread of she knows not what. Again I say, Come!

“Yours,

“EVE W.”

“Thank Heaven! I have found her at last!” exclaimed Hugh, when he had read the letter a second time, and had made sure that his eyes were not deceiving him. And then, strong man though he was, a mist of tears dimmed his eyes for a little while, and all his heart was melted within him. “Eve says that my darling wrote twice, but no letter from her has ever been received by me. That will be a matter to inquire into when I come back.” He looked at his watch, and found that he had just a couple of hours to spare before the departure of the next London train. His first act was to write and send a line to Mrs. Bruhn, telling her whither he was about to go, and on what errand. Then he hurried round to a few of his most important patients, and arranged with the same good friend that had acted for him previously to look after the remainder during his absence. Then back home, where he hastily packed a small travelling valise, by which time it was necessary to set out for the station. As he was going down the steps, he bethought himself of Charlotte. Turning for a moment to the servant, he said, “Tell Miss Charlotte, when she comes in, that I have had good news, and am off to London. Tell her also that I hope to be back sometime to-morrow, but not alone.” Then he went.

Charlotte came back in about an hour, and Hugh's message was at once repeated to her word for word. The blind girl's face blanched to a still more deathly whiteness as her ears drank in the message,

while an expression of such fiendish malignity cramped her features for a moment, as caused the girl who had been speaking to her to shrink from her side as though she had caught a glimpse of some foul and hideous witch. Charlotte shivered from head to foot, then drew herself up proudly, and went slowly upstairs to her own room.

Hugh had many strange questions to ponder in his mind as he was borne swiftly Londonwards. But, ponder them as he might, no solution of them was possible to him till the end of his journey should be reached. Could he have had his own way, he would have transformed the sorry hack, behind which he was driven through the London streets, into a winged Pegasus that should have borne him swiftly through the air to the spot where his loved one was awaiting him.

Yes, she was awaiting him with a heart that beat as high and anxiously as his own. She heard the cab stop, she heard the door opened, she heard his footstep on the stairs, and next moment they were clasped heart to heart, and all the wretched time just ended seemed like an evil dream that is only remembered to be smiled at in the bright gladness of morning.

"Why did you not trust me, dear?" whispered Trix to her husband, as they sat together hand in hand, she with her head resting on his shoulder, in the grey twilight of the winter afternoon. "If you had only confided in me, all this misery would have been saved to both of us."

"It would," answered Hugh contritely. And then he kissed his wife again, by way of showing how penitent he was. "I was mad—wrong—foolish. I wished you never to know that you were not my first love—that I had ever cared for another than yourself. I had a ridiculous idea in my head—how ridiculous I now for the first time really see—that if you should ever learn that I had promised myself in marriage long before I knew you; that I had whispered words of love in other ears, as I have since whispered them in yours—I should stand less high in your regards, and that you would set less value on my affection should you ever learn that it was a second-hand article that had at one time been the property of some one else."

"You foolish old Hugh! How little you knew me!"

"I measured you after my own standard. I felt that it would be painful to me to know that you had ever loved before; and, reversing the case, I feared the effect of such knowledge on yourself. I wanted your heart to be so entirely my own, that I would not willingly allow the faintest shadow of any possible estrangement to come between us. We shall know each other better for the future," said Hugh.

"Yes, in that we shall be gainers by our lesson. Come what may, I can never, never doubt you again, dear. Eve Warriner has told me her story. She has told me of your untiring efforts to seek her out, and how, when you had found her, you could not rest content till you had brought about a reconciliation between her and her father. All the hardness, all the bitterness that was turning my heart to gall

melted away for ever when she accidentally let slip the name of the man who had not merely forgiven her the great wrong she had done him, but had covered his forgiveness with an action so beautiful. But why did you not answer my letters? I wrote to you twice, but when there came no reply, not even a line to say that you would never forgive me, nor receive me back as your wife, then I felt that I was indeed forgotten, and should have been glad to die, and trouble no one any more."

"No letter from you ever reached me," answered Hugh. "On that point you may rest assured, otherwise you would have seen me here long ago. It almost seems to me as if some treachery has been at work, trying to keep us asunder. But that must be a matter for after inquiry."

Trix then went on to tell her husband by what strange accident it fell out she had come to be an inmate of Mrs. Clemson's house. How Mrs. Clemson, having gone to the station to see Eve Warriner and Dr. Randolph off by train on their way to Etwold, had found Dr. Randolph's wife in a fainting fit, and had brought her home without knowing who she was. Then she went on to tell Hugh of her illness, and how she had been nursed and tended by Mrs. Clemson and Eve as though she had been a dear relative of both.

"God bless them for it!" said Hugh fervently, as Trix laid a happy, tearful face on her husband's breast. "Such actions seem to bring heaven nearer to earth, and make this world a brighter place to live in."

Mrs. Clemson's pleasant little parlour had never held four happier people than it held that evening. They sat up till the small hours of the morning, for they had a thousand things to say, and they all seemed as if they had known each other for fifty years. At noon next day, Dr. Randolph and his wife set out for Helsingham. Before their departure, Hugh settled the pecuniary part of his obligation to Mrs. Clemson, but the debt of gratitude that was owing to her he felt could never be repaid. His friendship was hers through life; and he did not leave till he had wrung from the old lady a promise to visit himself and his wife at Helsingham in the course of the coming spring.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE GREEN BOTTLE ON THE TOP SHELF.

DR. RANDOLPH had telegraphed the time of his arrival, and Mr. and Mrs. Bruhn and Mr. Davenant were all on the platform of the Helsingham station when he and Trix alighted from the train. That the meeting was a very happy one need hardly be said. Mr. Bruhn's carriage was in waiting, and they were all driven to Brook Lodge, where they found Mrs. Sutton and Miss Easterbrook awaiting their

arrival. Charlotte Herne had also been invited, but had pleaded illness as an excuse for staying at home. Both to Mrs. Sutton and Miss Easterbrook the fact that Trix had left her home for some unexplained reason was well known; and not only to them, but to Mr. and Mrs. Bruhn and Mr. Davenant a full explanation was due of what still seemed so unaccountable. That explanation was given by Hugh Randolph immediately on the arrival of the party at Brook Lodge. He would have taken the blame of what had happened entirely on his own shoulders, if Trix would have allowed him to do so. But when he had made his statement, she made hers, and left her hearers to apportion the censure as they might think best. Into those explanations it is not needful that we should enter here. What the tenor of them would be, the reader will readily surmise. Fortunately, the fact that Mrs. Randolph had left home without the knowledge or consent of her husband had been carefully concealed from even the servants of her own house. Hugh's flurried inquiries for her when he first missed her on his return from Etwold might possibly have raised some suspicion in their minds as to the real facts of the case; but it came afterwards to be understood among the household that Mrs. Randolph had been suddenly called away to attend on a sick relative, and although there might be room for surmise, there was none for downright scandal.

Thus it fell out that, beyond the little party assembled that evening at Brook Lodge, there were only two people in all Helsingham who really knew that Mrs. Randolph had run away from home. One of those two was Charlotte Herne, and she might be thoroughly trusted, as being one of the family. The other was Mr. Dawkins, the superintendent of police, and in his memory the knowledge of Trix's little escapade would be locked up, as in a strong box impenetrable to every one but himself.

A pleasant little dinner, and a pleasant evening afterwards; an early break-up, for Trix was still far from strong; and then Mr. and Mrs. Randolph were driven home in Mr. Bruhn's brougham.

"I am sorry Charlotte was not at Brook Lodge this evening," said Hugh to Trix as they were going along. "She sent word that she was unwell; but that was probably a mere excuse to avoid going into company. You know as well as I do what a strange, shy creature she is. I must ascertain at once on reaching home whether there is anything really the matter with her."

Charlotte Herne's presence in the house was the only shadow that lay upon Trix's heart as she came back home with her husband. It was a shadow that lay dark and chill, a shadow that the sunshine of her husband's love could dispel only for a time. The moment she was out of his presence, it was there again, brooding over her like a dark-winged bird from which there was no escape. She had escaped it for a time by being away; but to-night she felt the old influence creeping over her again, and chilling her to the heart as she drew

near home ; and when Hugh spoke to her about Charlotte, she had no words in which to answer him.

Hugh had sent a message from the station, so that the arrival of himself and Mrs. Randolph was not unexpected at home. While Trix was upstairs taking off her things, he rang for the parlour-maid.

That matter of the missing letters lay heavily on his mind, and he could not rest till he had done his best to fathom it.

"Whose duty has it been of late," he asked the girl, "to take the post letters out of the box every morning, and lay them on the table ready for me?"

"Since Mrs. Randolph went away, the box has always been opened by Tib, and the letters taken by her to Miss Charlotte."

"That was done by Miss Charlotte's instructions, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"If Tib is in Miss Charlotte's room, tell her that I want to speak to her. If she has gone home, let her be sent for without delay."

"I never liked having that girl about the house," soliloquised Hugh, while Tib was being sent for. "There is something of the slyness and cunning of a bad old woman about her; and had not Charlotte's partiality for her been so evident, I should have sent her packing long ago."

Tib came panting in a few minutes later, having evidently run all the way from home. She stood in great awe of Dr. Randolph, having an instinctive notion that she was by no means a favourite with him. Hugh's first question told her what she most dreaded to hear, that the stern young doctor had a suspicion that his letters had been tampered with. To do Tib justice, she did all that lay in her power to screen both her mistress and herself, and would probably have been quite willing to take the entire blame on to her own shoulders, had there been any possibility of keeping Charlotte out of the transaction. But Hugh's cross-examination was too searching to allow of her escaping without telling the entire truth. Little by little, the facts of the case, as already known to the reader, were elicited from her reluctant lips. Tib's knowledge of the matter ended with the verification of the two letters addressed in that particular handwriting which she had been told by Charlotte to identify. For what reason Charlotte wanted those two particular letters picking out from the rest, and whether, after being so identified, they were handed over by her to Hugh, or were kept back for some purpose of her own, were points on which Tib was in utter ignorance.

"You say that Miss Charlotte showed you a certain envelope addressed to me," said Hugh; "and that the two letters afterwards pointed out by you were in a similar writing. Where is that envelope?"

"Locked up in a drawer in Miss Charlotte's room," answered Tib.

"If I were to show you another envelope in the same writing, do you think that you could recognise it?"

"Yes, sir; I am sure I could," answered Tib readily, who, now that the worst had been wrung from her, determined to make her case as good as possible by sticking to the truth in minor details.

Hugh opened his writing-desk, and taking out of it a dozen envelopes addressed to him by different people, only one of which was in Trix's writing, he spread the lot before Tib, and told her to look at them and tell him whether any of them were in a writing similar to that of the two letters identified by her for Charlotte. Tib ran her eye over the envelopes, and, without a moment's hesitation, picked out the one written by Trix.

"This one," she said, "is the same as the two letters, and as the envelope locked up in Miss Charlotte's drawer."

There was nothing more to be got out of Tib. With a severe reprimand, and a caution not to speak to any one of what had just passed between them, Hugh dismissed the girl till morning. His next duty, and it was a painful one, was to see Charlotte, and demand from her such an explanation as seemed to him necessitated by the circumstances of the case. During the past half-hour, an abyss seemed to have opened at his feet, into which he was afraid to look. To a man of a frank, honourable, and unsuspicious nature, such as was Hugh Randolph, life can have few bitter discoveries than that of domestic treachery, of systematic deceit, on the part of those we love and hold in supremest confidence. The foundations on which the soul has reared its earthly dwelling are shaken, and all around us the ground trembles under our feet.

But infirmity of purpose was not one of Hugh Randolph's weaknesses. A few minutes given to deep and painful thought, and then he went upstairs in search of Charlotte, who had not been seen by any one out of her own rooms since the forenoon of the previous day.

She had understood but too clearly the message left her by Hugh. She knew that, in spite of all her patient scheming, her house of cards had tumbled to the ground, and that it could never again be rebuilt by her. By what means Hugh had discovered the whereabouts of his lost wife, she was utterly at a loss to imagine. She sent for Tib, and questioned her as to the possibility of any letter in that particular writing which she had been told to pick out having passed her that morning without detection. But Tib stoutly denied that such could have been the case, and Charlotte was thrown back upon the merest conjecture as to how Hugh could have come by his information. The question was, how much or how little did he know? Did he know anything of the missing letters, and of Charlotte's share in that nefarious piece of work? He could hardly have known anything of it when he left home, or he would not have left her a message that he had heard good news. But what might he not learn while he was away? In any case, she had no remedy but to await his return with what patience was possible to her. She would not have long to wait. The best and the worst would soon be known to her. Her hated

rival was coming back—so much she knew already from the message sent her from Brook Lodge—coming back to be reinstated in all the rights and honours due to her position as the wife of Hugh Randolph ; while she, Charlotte, would sink again into the mere nonentity that she had been between the date of Trix's marriage and that of her leaving home. Charlotte's heart was very bitter within her as she thought of these things, and she awaited the coming of Hugh with a sort of dogged patience, eager and yet dreading to know the result of his journey to London.

At length she heard his footsteps coming up the higher flight of stairs that led to her room, and her heart began to beat tumultuously.

"Are you here, Charlotte?" he asked, as he opened the door, for the room was unlighted.

"Yes, Hugh, I am here," she answered plaintively, out of the darkness.

"I have something to say to you, Charlotte. But ring for lights, please. The place is as dark as a tomb."

"Darkness and light are both as one to poor me," she answered as she rang the bell.

She knew at once, from the cold constrained tones of Hugh's voice, that he was displeased with her about something. What that something was she needed no prophet to tell her, and she nerved her soul for the coming encounter. Presently a lighted lamp was brought in ; then the door was shut, and they were left to themselves.

"Charlotte," began Hugh, in a voice that was very grave, and not untouched with sadness, "you and I have lived under the same roof for a long time ; we have been as brother and sister to each other for many years. One of the dearest objects of my life has been to soften, as far as in me lay, the terrible affliction under which you are a sufferer ; while, on the other hand, I have always had the most implicit faith in you, and would have trusted my reputation, my honour, my life itself into your care, feeling confident that you would have guarded them as religiously as if they had been your own."

"And your confidence would have been fully justified by the event," answered Charlotte, with bitter pride.

"To-night, however, I have heard something that has shattered my faith in you for ever," went on Hugh, without heeding the interruption.

"Unless—unless, indeed, there are some facts still in the background with which I have not been made acquainted, and which, when brought forward by you, will throw an altogether different light on a transaction which, as it stands at present, certainly demands some explanation at your hands. Before I go on any further, however, let me earnestly entreat that you will answer the few questions I shall have to put to you truthfully and without prevarication. If you have done me any wrong, own to it at once. Do not let me have the added ignominy of knowing that you are trying to shelter yourself under a lie."

"Your words are very severe, Cousin Hugh," said Charlotte mournfully; "but ask me what you will. I swear to tell you nothing but the truth."

"That is all I ask," said Hugh. He sat silently for a few moments, playing absently with his watchguard, as if at a loss how to begin what he wanted to say. The lamp was between them, and Charlotte sat opposite to him, except for her breathing, as motionless as a statue, and almost as pale. Her beautiful intense eyes were fixed on vacancy: in that dazzling light she was as one stone-blind, seeing nothing, unless it was some inner vision of things known to herself alone.

"During the time my wife was from home," began Hugh at last, "all post letters that came to my address passed through your hands before they were allowed to reach me?"

"They did."

"The girl Tib was instructed by you to take all letters out of the box immediately after they had been left by the postman, and give them at once into your hands?"

"She was."

"She was further instructed by you to examine the directions of each batch of letters, and pick out any that might be written in one particular hand which she had been taught to detect?"

"She was."

"You have in your possession an envelope addressed to me. The letters which the girl was instructed to pick out were those which she judged to be in the same writing as that of the envelope?"

"They were."

"By whom was the address on that envelope written?"

"By your wife."

"How many letters were pointed out to you by the girl as being written by the same person as the envelope was addressed by?"

"Two."

"What became of those letters?"

"I burnt them."

"You read them, or, rather, caused them to be read to you, and then burnt them?"

"They were burnt without being opened. Not a single word of their contents became known to me."

"But what possible motive could you have for such an extraordinary course of action?"

"I had my private reasons."

"No doubt. But be good enough to explain to me what those reasons were."

"Your wife had left her home—left it without your knowledge—had gone you knew not whither. I was wishful that she should not come back. I wanted to break the link of communication between you and her. I wanted her to be lost to you for ever."

"But why did you wish that my wife should be lost to me for ever?"

"Because I hate her."

"You—hate—my—wife!"

"I—hate—your—wife. I have hated her from the moment I first heard her name. I shall hate her to the last moment of my life!"

"You must be a fiend in human shape! What have I done to deserve this at your hands?"

"What have you done, Cousin Hugh? Ah, me! You have been like the dearest and best of brothers. For your sake I would go through fire and water; I would give my life to save you from injury."

"And yet you have done your best to work me an irreparable injury—one that would have wrecked my happiness for life."

"It may seem so to you now," said Charlotte, with a bitter smile. "Time will teach you to think differently. In years to come, you will find that it is not within the power of any pretty face either to make or mar your happiness."

"You must allow me to be the best judge of my own happiness. That is a question which I am not disposed to argue either with you or any one else. All that I can deal with in the present case is the simple fact that, for some reason best known to yourself, you dislike my wife—'hate her' was the term used by you—and that, in pursuance of the ill-feeling with which you regard her, you have done your best to turn an accidental separation into a permanent one, and to drive her from her home for ever. A strange mode, truly, of showing your regard for me! I will not press you further for your reasons for what you have done. I don't care to know them. To analyse the motives that could have tempted you to an action so detestable, would be sorry work for any one; at all-events, it is a task upon which I do not care to enter. One thing is very certain—that you must quit this roof at once. I need not dilate on what will probably seem to you a very minor matter—that you have utterly forfeited my affection and esteem, for I do not suppose that they were ever of much value to you. This is the last time that I shall trouble you with my presence. Early in the morning I will make arrangements with Mrs. Sutton to receive you temporarily. As to what your future movements may be, when once you shall have quitted this house, that is no concern nor interest of mine. In a few hours you and I will have done with each other for ever."

He rose and moved towards the door. Charlotte was still sitting, white and motionless, with a face like that of some fair young sorceress who had just heard her doom.

At the door Hugh turned. "Understand me," he said in slow, concentrated tones. "To-morrow morning you quit this house for ever."

"Fear not; I shall be ready," she answered. Then Hugh went out, and shut the door after him.

"His heart is as hard as a nether millstone," she murmured as the

noise of his footsteps died away downstairs. And then she fell to the ground in a fit.

She came to her senses slowly and painfully. But as she called to mind all that had happened to her within the last few hours, and remembered that to-morrow she must seek another home, she almost wished that she had never come back to life. The weather was very bleak, and she rose from the floor shivering with cold. She bathed her hands and face, and bound up her hair, and wrapped a warm shawl round her shoulders. The glare of the lamp dazzled her sensitive orbs, so she turned it out.

There was upon her a sense of utter loneliness and desolation such as she had never felt since the first few hours after her mother's death, and before the friends which that misfortune brought round her—her cousin Hugh among the rest—had proved to her that sympathy and love might still be hers, although her best friend was gone for ever. And now the same sense of being alone in the world was upon her again, only in a more intense degree, and with a hopelessness of change that made her very soul grow chill within her.

"I feel as if I were the only flesh-and-blood creature left alive," she muttered half-aloud, "and that besides myself the world held nothing but ghosts. Oh, Hugh! Hugh! you are not worthy of being loved as I would have loved you—as I have loved you! I lifted you up in the desert of my heart as a beautiful brazen image, perfect, inimitable; but your feet are of clay, when I come to look closer, and you are not quite the king of men I fondly deemed you to be. And yet I cannot help loving you—more fool I!—more fool I!"

The darkness and quietude of her rooms, the sense of her utter isolation from all of her own kind, began to weigh upon her, and even to frighten her. She opened the door and listened. The sound of voices in the lower parts of the house came floating up the staircase—Hugh's deep tones and the thinner voice of a woman, a voice that Charlotte recognised but too well. Without thought or care for her actions—for what worse could happen to her than had happened already?—and guided only by the impulse of the moment, she crept noiselessly down the flight of stairs that led from her rooms to the more inhabited parts of the house, pausing and listening on every stair as she went down. Near the bottom of the flight, and concealed from any one on the landing by a curve of the stairs, was a niche which had probably been intended for the reception of a statue holding a lamp, but which no one ever remembered to have been so occupied. Into this recess Charlotte climbed, and there stowed herself away. She durst not venture any lower down for fear of encountering Hugh, whose sentence of doom seemed still to ring in her ears.

The voices sounded nearer and nearer, as Hugh and his wife came slowly upstairs on their way to bed. In a few moments they reached

the landing immediately below the one close to which Charlotte was in hiding, and from this point their voices were plainly audible to her.

"I have left the bag that contains my medicine on the hall table," said Mrs. Randolph to her husband; "and as the servants are all in bed, I shall have to trouble you to fetch it for me."

"What! you a doctor's wife, and taking another man's physic!" exclaimed Hugh. "That will never do. I must make you up a mixture of my own in the morning."

"Do as you like in the morning," answered Trix, "only let me have the bottle I brought with me to-night. It has done me so much good that I intend taking it to the last drop."

"A most praiseworthy resolution! I no longer hesitate to fetch the wonderful mixture."

He ran quickly down while Trix waited for him on the landing, holding her candle aloft over the banisters to light him on his way.

Presently Hugh came back with the bottle, tasting from it as he came.

"Precisely the sort of stuff that I should have made up for you," he exclaimed, with a smack of the lips as he drew near Trix; "which shows that your London doctor thoroughly understood your case."

"A one-sided way of paying a compliment to yourself," answered Trix. "If I had not happened to say that the mixture suited me, I have no doubt that you would have made me up something entirely different."

"Just the same impertinent creature that you always were!" sighed Hugh. But it was the sigh of a happy man. Then the door of their room was shut, and Charlotte heard no more.

Charlotte crept back upstairs as noiselessly as she had crept down. That same sense of loneliness and desolation was still upon her.

"There must surely be other poor wretches in the world as miserable as I am, and with troubles as grievous to bear," she murmured. "They ought to put us on an island by ourselves, we who have nothing in common with the happy ones of the earth. The most miserable among us should be king, and they whose troubles were the heaviest should have command over the rest."

She was in no mood for bed. To sleep would have been an impossibility as her mind then was. So she coiled herself up in her favourite easy-chair, and drew a corner of her shawl over her face, although the room was pitch-dark; and tried to steady her mind, and to elicit some coherent chain of thought out of the mental chaos in which she was blindly struggling.

Go she must on the morrow—seek another home, she neither knew nor cared whither; but while still here, she wanted to think out and elaborate some great scheme of revenge, before which her late pet project of purloining her rival's letters should pale as a matter of little moment. Just now, however, she could not think, she could

only feel—she could only writhe, as the trodden worm writhes, no one either knowing or caring for its agony.

Midnight had struck before her return upstairs. One o'clock and two o'clock came and went, and still she stirred not; still she sat with the red shawl thrown over her head, like some witch awaiting the summons of her master.

About half-past two Charlotte heard the sharp ting-ting of the night-bell. She had heard it often before in the sleepless watches of the night, and knew at once what it meant. Dr. Randolph was wanted, and must go. Charlotte slid off her chair, and walked lightly across the floor and opened her door a little way, and listened. She heard the door of the dressing-room opened, and then she heard Hugh go lightly downstairs, and let himself out into the street. Crouched on her hands and knees, like a wild animal in its lair, and with every nerve on the alert, Charlotte listened without change of posture for a full half hour. Inside the house all was silent, save the voice of the old clock on the stairs, ticking monotonously like a death-watch that never ceased. From without there came no sound, save now and again a low, faint murmur, as though the wind were trying to whisper some dread secret, but could not make itself understood. When the clock struck three, Charlotte arose, and shook back the heavy masses of her ashen hair, and pressed her fingers over her burning eyes. As she stood thus, she saw clearly, as in a vision, the thing she had set her soul to do, and the way in which it must be done.

"I have shut the door behind me, and the Evil One has the key; and now I must go on, happen what may."

Then she went into her bed-room, and took off her red shawl and her grey winsey gown, and put on another dress, black, soft, and ghost-like. Then she slipped her feet into a pair of tiny mocassins, which some traveller had made her a present of, and which she much affected in her silent perambulations about the house. Just as she was ready to start, she thought she heard a faint noise downstairs, not unlike the opening and shutting of a door; but it was so slight that it might have been due to almost any other cause—to the creaking of some door or window in the wind, to some movement of the cat in the regions below stairs, or to the tapping of the old beech-tree in the garden against the drawing-room window as it swayed to some stronger gust than common. From whatever cause the sound might proceed, it caused Charlotte's heart to leap with sudden terror. She listened where she stood, without moving, for full ten minutes; but, as before, all was silent in the house save the ceaseless death-tick of the old clock on the stairs.

"I shall be frightened of my own shadow next," she said contemptuously. "What I have got to do must be done quickly, for Hugh may be back any moment."

Then, without a pause, and almost in one breath as it seemed to

her, she found herself standing in the corridor at the bottom of the upper flight of stairs, and within a few yards of Hugh's dressing-room door. A few swift, stealthy strides took to this door, which she found ajar, as it had been left by Hugh. Inch by inch Charlotte pushed it open, till there was space enough for her to enter. With this room, and with the room beyond it, she was thoroughly acquainted. The position of every piece of furniture in both of them was well known to her; and if only the person in the inner room were just now sound asleep, she (Charlotte) had little fear about effecting her purpose undetected. As, however, the person in question might chance to be awake, Charlotte was obliged to exercise the utmost precaution. One false step, or chance movement, might betray her, and frustrate her deadly design. Little by little, a few inches at a time, she advanced into the dressing-room, hardly breathing herself in her anxiety to hear the soft, regular breathing of the inmate of the inner room, telling her that she was asleep. In the outer room a night-lamp was burning dimly, by whose faint light everything would have looked vague and impersonal to ordinary eyes, but it was precisely the sort of half-light that suited Charlotte best. One of her eyes had strengthened and improved very much of late, and by such a light as that now in the dressing-room, she could discern the outlines of almost any object with tolerable clearness. Thus, in the present case, she could make out each article of furniture in the room while she was still a yard or two from it; the outlines being sufficiently clear for her to recognise what particular object it might be, although the minute peculiarities of its appearance were utterly beyond her powers at present.

Forward she went over the carpeted floor, step by step, black and silent as a shadow, till the dressing-table was reached. After a careful but noiseless examination of the different articles on it, she shook her head with an air of disappointment, and advanced still deeper into the room. At the further end, and within a couple of yards of the door that led into the inner room, was a fireplace with a mantelpiece of white marble. On this mantelpiece Charlotte found the object she was in search of—the bottle of medicine which Trix had brought with her from London. It was standing close by the night-lamp, the light of which shone full upon it. Peering Charlotte, when she got as far as the mantelpiece, discovered it at once. There was a label on the bottle, but her eyes were not clever enough to read it. She held the bottle up between her eyes and the lamp, and could distinguish that it was about three-parts full. The sleeper in the next room moved uneasily on her pillow. Charlotte stood for two or three minutes like one turned into stone; then, there being no further sound or movement from the inner room, she glided quickly back, and regained the corridor, carrying the bottle with her.

Along the corridor, and down the two flights of stairs that brought her to the ground-floor of the house, Charlotte now went without

hesitation or delay. Five minutes more, and her purpose would be accomplished. She made straight for the door of the surgery, which, somewhat to her surprise, she found partially open, and went in. She concluded that Hugh had had occasion to enter it before leaving the house, and had omitted to close the door after him. In the surgery a small jet of gas was always left burning, so that Hugh might be enabled to find anything at a moment's notice should he be suddenly summoned in the night ; but even had there been no light, Charlotte would still have been able to find what she was in want of.

While Charlotte was still quite blind, and long before the image or Beatrice Davenant had come between her and her cousin, in her perpetual prying into every nook and corner of the old house—if those could be called prying where sight was wanting,—she had not let the surgery pass unvisited. Indeed, it had been a favourite pastime with her to follow her cousin Hugh there, and assist him in the concoction of his draughts and mixtures. Her assistance had probably been a hindrance rather than otherwise to the young surgeon ; but being eminently good-natured, and perceiving how it gratified Charlotte to fancy herself of any, the slightest, service to him, he humoured her whim, and often claimed her help when he was not particularly busy, and a few minutes more or less in the surgery were of no great consequence to him.

Charlotte had learned to distinguish most of the principal drugs and medicaments by their smell, and as each of them had its own particular place on the surgery shelves, her retentive memory enabled her to recollect the positions of all the jars and phials the contents of which were in frequent request. Thus, if Hugh asked her to get him the opium flask, she would go at once to the shelf on which it was always put, and counting by means of her fingers the number of flasks from one end, she would pick out the one asked for, because she knew that when not in use it was invariably put in the particular spot from which she had taken it. But to make assurance doubly sure, she always smelt at the contents before giving the phial to Hugh.

A certain small top shelf in one corner of the surgery held nothing but poisons, and for Charlotte this one shelf had more interest than all the others put together. She never wearied of talking with her cousin Hugh about subjects that had the remotest reference to toxicology ; and Hugh, on his part, if he did not always answer her point-blank questions on such matters as categorically as she would have liked, did still enlighten her in a certain degree as to the qualities and effects of the different poisons, vegetable and mineral, which were contained in the stoppered bottles on the little top shelf.

This shelf was so high from the ground that it could not be reached without the assistance of a small step-ladder which was always kept in the surgery. As if in aid of Charlotte's design—"as if the fiend himself had put them there on purpose," the girl muttered to herself

—the steps were standing to-night exactly under the shelf which she was desirous of reaching, so that there was no fear of disturbing any one in the house by the noise of their removal.

Up these steps—one, two, three—Charlotte climbed slowly, and as it seemed, only by a great effort, and then stood motionless for a little while on the top.

Had any one been there to limn her face, they would have seen how very white it was; how locked and resolute, with yet an expression of intense pain across the low, broad forehead, and in the hard set lines of the mouth. The beautiful eyes were still beautiful, but looked as the eyes of Lady Macbeth might have looked when she walked in her sleep, and could not rub the blood stains off her lily hand.

The flask she was in search of was made of thick green glass, and its place was the left-hand corner of the top shelf. Placing for a moment the bottle she had brought with her on a lower shelf, she was just in the act of putting up her hand to take the flask, when she suddenly turned with a startled look on her face, and taking hold of the skirt of her black dress, she made as though she were pulling it away from the grasp of some one who had seized it from below.

"I must do it! I must do it!" she exclaimed in an excited whisper, addressing herself to some imaginary person conjured up by her excited fancy. "I have sworn to be revenged, and I will not break my oath. Oh, mother, mother! ask me anything but this. Ask me to drown myself,—to poison myself, and I will not hesitate a moment. Life has no joy for me, death no dread. But this thing I must do, whatever may come after. Release me, mother! Release me, I say! Though all the dead in Elvedon churchyard were to rise from their graves and entreat me, they should not turn me from my purpose.—She is gone—gone! Ah, me! perhaps I shall never see her more, not even in the land of shadows, and when I am a ghost myself."

Her eyes, as she spoke these last words, seemed to follow the figure till it disappeared through the doorway. Then, with another great sigh, she seemed to drag herself back from all thought save of what she had yet to do. Without allowing herself another moment for hesitation, she took down the green flask drew out the stopper and smelt the contents, so as to make herself certain that it really held the subtle and deadly poison that she expected to find in it. Satisfied that she was right as to the poison, she uncorked the medicine bottle, poured on to the floor about a quarter of what it contained, and filled it up from the flask to the original mark. Slowly and steadily, without the waste of a single drop, she poured in the poison. Then she put back the flask, recorked the bottle, and stepped down to the ground, giving utterance, as she did so, to one of her low, witch-like laughs.

She was passing round a corner of the counter on her way to leave

the room when all at once she came to a dead stand, and in that single moment the expression of her countenance changed to one of the most extreme terror. A certain delicate instinct, which most blind people possess in a greater or lesser degree, told her that she was not alone in the room. Some one beside herself was there. She stood perfectly motionless, only breathing a little faster than she was wont.

There was one corner of the surgery, where a large cupboard had formerly stood, that was in deeper shadow than the rest, and it was here that the unseen witness of what she had done was lurking. On entering the room she had taken the opposite side of the counter, but on her way back to the door the skirts of her dress must almost have swept the intruder's feet ; and it was her proximity to him, although her eyes had utterly failed to detect his presence, that had told her she was not alone.

"Who is there? Speak!" said Charlotte at last, when the death-like silence was no longer endurable. It seemed to her that it was not she, Charlotte Herne, who spoke, but some one else with a voice that came from beyond the grave.

"It is I, Hugh Randolph," answered the young surgeon, as he stepped out of his dark corner. He had come back after half an hour's absence, and had let himself quietly in by means of his latch-key. He had gone direct into the surgery, and after doing what he wanted, had just turned down the gas preparatory to going back to bed, when he was startled by hearing a light footstep coming swiftly down the lower flight of stairs and had but just time to step back into the dim corner, when Charlotte entered the room.

"You here, cousin!" murmured Charlotte almost inaudibly, and the tell-tale bottle, dropping from her nerveless fingers, was smashed into a dozen pieces on the ground.

"Wretch!" cried Hugh. "I have seen all that you have done since you came into this room. You are a murderess in intention, and would have been one in fact had I not been led here, and so enabled to frustrate your hellish design. Your mother was my father's sister; I cannot forget that. Therefore, all that I can do, even now, after this fresh proof of your desire to work me harm, is to banish you from this house for ever. But I will give you no further chance of working mischief while you remain here. I shall lock you up in your own rooms till nine in the morning, at which hour I shall expect you to be ready to leave. Upstairs if you please. I dare not trust you out of my sight again till I have you safe under lock and key. Go!"

Charlotte answered not a single word, did not even confront him with her eyes; but at Hugh's last word she walked out of the room. Out of the room, along the corridor, and upstairs, slowly, mechanically like a woman in a dream; the young surgeon, stern and pale, holding aloft a small hand lamp which he had lighted at the gas in the surgery.

Hugh said afterwards that never till his dying day would that picture

be forgotten by him : the picture of Charlotte Herne going slowly up the wide, old-fashioned, oaken staircase, in her mocassins, and her long, trailing, black robe ; her face a livid white, like that of a person some days dead ; her ashen locks streaming low down over her shoulders ; her diminutive figure, erect, and braced up ; and her bearing as proud and defiant as that of a queen on her way to execution.

To the young surgeon those three flights of stairs that had to be traversed before Charlotte's room was reached formed a veritable *via dolorosa* that seemed as if it would never come to an end. When the door was reached, Charlotte struck it open with a blow of her hand, and then without a word, or even a turn of the head, she went in, and passed at once out of the dim circle of light reflected from Hugh's lamp into the intense darkness of the room beyond. She melted, as it were, into the blackness, and became a portion of it.

Hugh shut the door, and locked it from the outside, and then went downstairs, carrying the key with him. At nine o'clock he went back upstairs, and knocked at the door. There was no reply. He unlocked the door and went in. He found Charlotte lying on her bed in the adjoining room, dressed as he had seen her last. A small empty phial on the ground close by told the tale but too well.

One of her last acts, if not the very last, had been to pin a scrap of paper to the bosom of her dress, on which she had written these words :—

“ HERE LIES CHARLOTTE HERNE.

SHE LOVED NOT WISELY, BUT TOO WELL.

PITY HER, AND PRAY FOR THE PEACE OF HER SOUL.”

(To be concluded.)



"TREASURES."

DOMESTIC servants whose master I have been in reality or in name—these are my "treasures." It is as well to state this at the outset ; otherwise some readers of this magazine might consider the title a delusion and a snare.

There are "treasures" and "treasures." There is the servant who is handed over to you as a paragon of perfection—afterwards you often wonder why—and there is the one who establishes a right to the title by honest and faithful service, by evincing a genuine regard for, and interest in, your well-being. Also there is the servant who is a "treasure" because he or she is a curiosity.

It is now many years since I joined my regiment in Ireland, a boy of eighteen, thoughtful only of the pleasures of life, and ignorant of its cares and anxieties. The captain of my company, a worthy old soldier—young captains were scarce in those days—was kindness itself, and I always look back with grateful feelings to the paternal interest he took in me, the kind word he always had for me, and the firm but gentle reproof he administered to me when reproof was necessary.

One of his first acts of kindness lay in his selecting, after much thought, an old soldier of the company as my soldier-servant, in whose tender care he placed me. John Dodd, who was one of the oldest soldiers in the regiment, was one of the best officer's servants I have ever come across. He was not beautiful to look upon ; indeed, his countenance was at first view rather repellent. His complexion was of the boiled-lobster hue, his eyes were blue but watery, and he wore a big red moustache and long red Dundreary whiskers which harmonised ill both with the crimson of his face and the scarlet of his coat. Yet the watery eyes had withal a soft sympathetic look, and beneath the scarlet jacket beat as gentle a heart as ever beat in woman.

John Dodd saw at once that I was green, very green, in the ways of the world, and especially of the military world. Yet he never traded or presumed on my greenness. He treated me as the boy I was, yet with the respect due from the good soldier to his officer. He taught me what to do and what not to do ; he instilled habits of punctuality and neatness. I well remember how, on calling me one morning after a "big night" at mess, he looked at me sorrowfully, as I lay in bed feeling very miserable and not a little ashamed, and, shaking his rubicund head, suggested quietly that late hours and drink were things to be avoided. Poor old Dodd ! he drank like a fish himself, I verily believe, though he "carried it" so well that

never once did I see him the worse for liquor, never once did anything but the increased radiance of his countenance and an almost imperceptible tremor betray his bibulous propensities. Wrong as it may seem for me to say so, while I took his admonition to heart and resolved thenceforward to abjure late hours and excessive joviality, I nevertheless could not help entertaining a certain feeling of admiration for the knowing old soldier, who could enjoy his drink so diplomatically as to appear always void of offence.

In course of time the regiment was ordered to India. John Dodd, however, with his good-conduct medal and his five good-conduct badges, was detailed to remain at home and join the regimental dépôt. Before we left, the honest old soldier presented me with an ink-stand and a tobacco-pouch. The latter, which is by me while I write, was made out of the skin of a wild cat he had shot in New Zealand. As a last parting gift, he brought to my quarters the day before we embarked at Queenstown a very ugly pin-cushion which he had made with great care and skill of pieces of red, buff, blue, and vari-coloured cloths, ornamented with white beads, with forget-me-nots worked in blue and green beads in the centre and the words "Remember me" in brown beads beneath. He and his wife both wept over me. At least a dozen times did he wish me good-bye, sobbing the while like a child; and when the final parting came, I am not ashamed to confess that the tears sprang to my eyes, for I felt that in leaving him I was losing not only a trusty servant, but a real, kind-hearted friend.

Honest John Dodd! You have long ago been laid to rest, your soldiering days are long since passed, but your earnest devotion and disinterested thoughtfulness will remain ever fresh in my memory.

My next "treasure" was a faithful old Hindoo "bearer" (or valet) named Suraj something or other, whom my brother subalterns dubbed Sir Roger. What a good fellow he was! How angry I used to be because he *would* not speak English, and because I *could* not speak Hindustani! But all the anger was on my side; he was always patient, long-suffering, and willing, careful of my interests and as true as steel.

On returning from leave during my first hot-weather in India, Sir Roger, whom I had left in charge of my bungalow and belongings, greeted me in the verandah with a present in the shape of a tailless parrot enclosed within a cruelly diminutive cage. Knowing how the guileless Hindoo will often almost pluck an old bird to pass it off as a young one, I at first feared that even the wary Sir Roger had been imposed upon by one of his unscrupulous countrymen; and while thanking him for his gift, I threw out a hint at the bare possibility of the bird being an old one, in which case I should never be able to teach him to talk. The poor old bearer's feelings were wounded at the very suggestion. "No, Sahib," he said in an aggrieved tone, "he not ole bird, he young bird! I buy him soon after master go

away on leaf; then he all meat, no hair"—by which he intended to convey that the parrot when purchased was scarcely fledged.

To atone for my apparent ungraciousness I took the greatest interest in that bird. I provided him with a palatial cage, and many hours of those long hot-weather days did I devote to his education. After covering the cage over with a cloth, I used to sit alongside and repeat the same tomfoolery over and over again, till I was sick of the sound of my own voice. Sir Roger and the *Munshi*, who was teaching me Hindustani, evinced an equally keen interest in the parrot's instruction. They would take turns of "Prittee Pálee" and "Pálee love sugar." It was no use. Either from "cussedness" or from deficient cerebral development the parrot maintained a dogged silence for the months that I kept him—a silence only broken at intervals by an angry, blood-curdling screech and a wrestle with the bars or perches of his cage.

At that time my live-stock, exclusive of horse-flesh, consisted of a dear old dog, two monkeys, a mungoose, a mina, four squirrels, a kitten, and a small aviary full of avatavats and other small birds. Early one morning, before I was out of bed, I heard great "ructions" going on in the thatched roof of my bungalow, immediately over my head.

Shortly afterwards Sir Roger came in to call me, his face literally beaming with delight. He informed me that he had secured a valuable addition to my miniature menagerie, to wit two young wild cats. When dressed I went out and found two diabolical-looking little animals with collars and tethers on; and under the tree to which they were fastened was a large inverted flower-pot, in which a door had been made, placed there by the sweeper under Sir Roger's directions. They were not ordinary wild cats or *jangli billi*, that was very evident, but what they were I could not for the life of me tell. They had fox-like heads, and the most evil expression I have ever seen in man or beast. The *Munshi* said they were animals that fed on dead bodies, but as I had no dead bodies handy, and did not want any, I was never able to verify this assertion.

Sir Roger, who was firmly convinced that they would soon become tame and tractable, would squat on his heels by the hour—at a safe distance from the "cats"—snapping his fingers and coaxing the brutes with every sort of blandishment. It was very amusing to watch the old man at "feeding time," pushing their saucers of bread and milk within their reach with a long stick. His patience was wonderful, but unrewarded. For weeks the same performance went on several times a day, but the savage little beasts, with their unearthly cries, steadily repudiated the delicate attentions of Sir Roger.

They appeared to thrive, until one morning one of them was found unaccountably dead. The other seemed to pine so much that at last I had it killed. Poor old Sir Roger, whom they had cordially hated throughout the period of their acquaintance with him, was quite

distressed. For myself, I must say I did not share his grief; for though I was sorry the wretched creatures had ever been captured and placed in confinement, still once they were caught I did not care to let them loose about the place again—especially if they were on the look-out for my-dead body.

Time passed till one fine day the regiment received orders to proceed to Afghanistan. I was only allowed to take one servant on active service, and consequently as a Mussulman or low-caste Hindoo was necessary to look after my inner man, and as Sir Roger, besides being too old, was not of sufficiently low caste to do this work, I had to part with him.

The poor old fellow was very downcast, called me his father and mother, hoped I would come back from the war a Lord Sahib, and so on. Mine was the loss, however, for a valuable servant like Sir Roger soon found another master, whereas I had to take in his place—a lanky oily-tongued Mohammedan, a man with a perpetual grievance, rejoicing in the high-sounding though common name of Khuda Bakhsh ("the gift of God").

This beauty soon tired of the bitter cold of the Khyber in winter, and became very discontented; but it was not till we had gone farther up-country, and moved to a detached post in the turbulent Shinwari country, that Khuda Bakhsh's discomfort and dislike of active service caused his grandmother to die hundreds of miles away at Allahabad—a bereavement which necessitated his immediate return to India. A native servant's mother or grandmother will die for him again and again in the most magnanimous way whenever he is dissatisfied with his place.

I was not sorry to lose Khuda Bakhsh, in spite of the high character which I had received with him. He had drawn fabulous wages for some months, had been fitted out with warm clothes and a plentiful supply of blankets, and, as far as he was concerned, had done pretty well; yet I felt rather "up a tree" to know how I should replace him on active service in an enemy's country, especially at this out-of-the-way place, detached from the line of communications.

To my surprise and relief, however, a substitute was instantly forthcoming. This was a Madras Christian named Francis, a man with excellent "chits" (testimonials) and a great deal too good a knowledge of English, for he could both speak and write it. But beggars cannot be choosers, so I took him. We got on pretty well for a few days. He seemed intelligent and willing.

We went out for some days on an expedition, moving with as little baggage as possible. One camel was allowed for the kits of every eight officers, and, as the camels were to be loaded as lightly as possible, each officer was only able to take a flannel shirt, a pair of socks, soap, towel, and tooth-brush. Francis, who was with the camel on which my kit was carried, carefully contrived to lose my small bundle. As a consequence, when I wanted a change, I was

obliged to undress and wash my shirt and socks in a stream, letting them dry afterwards in the luckily broiling May sun, while I sat in the shade of a tree with my helmet on my head and a borrowed towel girt about my loins.

This little episode did not increase my affection for Francis. Nor was that worthy exactly happy and contented, for the dangers of actual warfare disturbed his equanimity. Hitherto he had passed his time in comparative safety in the stationary camps on the line of communications near the base at Peshawur. Accordingly, when we got back to camp after the successful termination of our expedition, Francis also had the misfortune to lose his grandmother, or his mother—I forget which.

My next venture was a camel-boy named Mághi, a very respectable young Punjabi Mussulman, who, having been sent by his father to enlist in a native cavalry regiment, had fallen amongst thieves at Loodiana, in the shape of gamblers, who fleeced him. Unable to enlist and buy a horse, and ashamed to return to his respected parent, he had taken service as a *sarwán* (camel-driver) and gone to the front. Being an intelligent and energetic boy, he had been promoted to the rank of *Duffadar*; but, numerous camels having gone the way of all flesh, his office became a sinecure, and I was thus able to get him as a private servant. As he could only speak Punjabi, of which I hardly knew a word, our conversation was mostly carried on by dumb show. However, he soon picked up Hindustani, and in a short time became a smart hard-working servant, always faultlessly turned out. I grew to like the boy very much, and congratulated myself on having accidentally become the possessor of such a treasure.

Soon after the regiment returned to India, a cash-box in my quarters was cut open, and a considerable sum of money was abstracted from it. Mághi was the very last person to be suspected of the theft. Moreover, it occurred when I was at mess, where Mághi was waiting at table behind my chair. I happened to go over to my quarters immediately after mess, and discovered the theft. I sent for Mághi. I might as well have questioned the Sphinx. To all appearances he was as innocent as my colonel. A few days afterwards, however, the boy was caught *en flagrant délit* stealing from a brother-servant who had saved a considerable sum of money with a view to getting married.

Of course it was a case of *cherchez la femme*. It came out that Mr. Mághi had a lady friend in the bazaar, and, his generosity to her being quite out of proportion to his monthly wage, he had resorted to gambling to provide funds. Games of chance having proved altogether too precarious a method of ensuring a steady and regular supply of the needful, he had adopted the more certain one of directly substituting *tuum* for *meum*. It also transpired that he had slipped across from the mess-house to my quarters, ripped open the cash-box with a knife, abstracted the cash (leaving the notes), and

returned to the mess in time to change my plate for the next course, with that placid and stolid countenance so peculiar to the Oriental. The last time I saw poor Mághi, he was handcuffed and chained, under escort to P——, to do "six months hard" in the gaol at that place.

It was now that an officer of the regiment who was leaving for England handed me over *his* treasure—a high-caste Hindoo named Damri. The character I received with him could not have been surpassed. He was indeed a most capable and excellent servant, though his caste was rather a stumbling-block. He was obliged to devote the greater part of every morning to his ablutions and *pūja* (worship), after which he would eat his *roti-khāna** clad in nothing but a loin-cloth, no matter what the state of the weather. Once when I was ill I wanted him to remove an empty cup, in which there had been beef-tea, from the chair by my bedside, and place some books there instead. My order, quite thoughtlessly given, was too much for the pious Hindoo. With a terrified look he eyed the cup as though it were a snake or scorpion, backed softly out of the room, and returned in a few minutes with my Mussulman *khidmatgār* (table-servant), directing him to remove the offensive article!

Poor Damri! he was a good fellow in his way, and a faithful servant. He remained in my service for nearly eighteen months, and, as far as I was concerned, might have remained longer; but, owing partly to his dislike of the Punjab and partly to my going on sick-leave to a hill-station—the native of the plains does not like the hills, as a rule—he made up his mind to leave.

To effect his object, he brought me a telegram from Lucknow addressed to him, and informing him that a law-suit about some property belonging to his family or claimed by his family was about to come on, and begging him to repair with all haste to Lucknow, as his evidence was essential to the success of the case. He said he would have to start that very afternoon by the mail-cart, leaving me, still barely convalescent, in the lurch for a bearer. I told him he could go, and that he need not think of returning. At this speech he expressed surprise, though of course he really had not the remotest intention of coming back. With expressions of profound regret at leaving the shadow of my illustrious presence, he hurried off to catch the mail and go down to the plains.

Some days afterwards I saw him swaggering about the bazaar. Probably he was waiting for a chum to accompany him down-country; but, needless to say, as I had thought from the first, property and law-suit were alike the offspring of a fertile imagination.

For some time afterwards I thought myself rather fortunate to possess servants who were not treasures. They "pursued the even tenor of their way" without distinguishing themselves in any manner. After this I came home on long leave.

* Meal; literally, bread-food or bread-meal.

On my return to India I arrived at the station in which my regiment was quartered just in time to secure an excellent bearer, whose master, a staff officer, was leaving for England. This man, Gunga Rám, was a first-rate head-servant, for he kept the syces (grooms), sweepers, and other inferior servants up to the mark in such a lordly way that they really respected him a great deal more than they did me. From long service as a servant to bachelor officers he had acquired considerable wealth, and had quite an extensive wardrobe. He was always turning out in some different-coloured gold-laced waistcoat, while round his neck he wore a massive gold chain, and his pudgy brown fingers were covered with rings. Take him all round he was a very superior person, and so impressed with his appearance and haughty demeanour was a lady of my acquaintance that she dubbed him "The Maharajah," a name which stuck to him.

One of the very few objections I had to him was that he was teaching himself English, and would while away his leisure time by scribbling my initials or my name all over the walls of my house. Unfortunately for the Maharajah, after he had been some six months in my service, I was married. The immediate effect of my marriage as regards him was that his monthly bill for lamp-oil, matches, forage, blacking, dogs' food, and numerous such items disappeared. My wife used to drive to the bazaar and do her own shopping. Consequently the Maharajah was no longer in a position to make purchases on my behalf, and make a profit varying from fifty to a hundred per cent. He accordingly quitted my service after a short time. I was sorry to lose him for many reasons, though of course there was no alternative.

A month or so before the Maharajah left, we were fortunate in getting into our service an excellent *bheestie** (water-carrier). To my mind the *bheestie* is the best class of servant in India. In nine cases out of ten he is hard-working, contented, faithful, and inoffensive; and he is gifted with more pluck and endurance than all his fellow-servants put together.

Ján Muhammad was not only all this, but he had the additional advantage of having been taught, while with his late master, to wait at table. We used him as *bheestie* and under-*khidmatgár*, and seeing what admirable stuff the man was made of, we soon afterwards promoted him to the high office of bearer and chief of all the servants. He was a real treasure to us, and I only hope his next master found him as invaluable as we did. Without exception he was the most honest and truthful servant I ever came across in India, and his devotion to us, and later to our child, was quite pathetic. He could not speak a word of English, which was trying to my wife, just fresh out from England; but she had a pretty little *ayah*, also a treasure in her way, who acted as interpreter when necessary. This *ayah*, by-the-bye, was one of the few natives of India whom I have seen

* More properly, *bihishti*; the real meaning is "an inhabitant of Paradise."

blush. She was very vain of her rosy cheeks, and once told my wife in confidence that, sweeper's wife as she was, she had rather a contempt for her fellow-countrymen and women, and was certain that she must have some English blood coursing in her veins !

Ján Muhammad and the *ayah* stayed with us for the remainder of our time in India. When we started on the long railway journey down to Bombay, the faithful Ján Muhammad accompanied us, the little *ayah* being replaced by an excellent Irish nurse, the wife of a sergeant in another regiment.

Ján Muhammad's assiduity and attention during that trying journey were only surpassed by his wonderful self-denial and devotion during the few days we spent in Bombay. The morning of our arrival our baby was taken seriously ill, and for three or four days her condition caused us the utmost anxiety. Ján Muhammad took up his abode on a blanket stretched in the passage outside the door of our rooms. There the honest fellow sat night and day, battling against sleep, in readiness to do anything he could to save the life of the little one he loved so well. I had almost to order him to go away to his meals. When the baby began to mend nothing pleased him more than to be allowed to walk up and down, up and down, carrying her tenderly in his arms, crooning to her, or talking to her. He had never seen the sea in his life before, but this did not prevent his coming out to the troopship with us in the boat. He was determined to see the last of us, and would have gone with us to the world's end. When at last he had to go down the ship's side and return to the *bunder* (quay), the poor fellow quite broke down. He stood in the boat waving to us until he reached the shore, and we were no longer able to distinguish him in the distant crowd.

Should our fate ever lead us again to India, I only hope we may be lucky enough to once more secure the services of honest Ján Muhammad.

After a short and uneventful stay in England, we were sent to Dublin, and for several years our regiment remained in Ireland.

So numerous are the stories which have been told of Irish servants and their peculiarities, that our experiences of them would appear tame. Nevertheless, of the many Irish servants we have had, some few are deserving of notice, and these have been treasures simply because they have been curiosities. No doubt there are hundreds of Irish servants who are treasures for other and better reasons, but it does not generally fall to the lot of members of the "foreign garrison" to secure the services of these excellent individuals. Moreover, the ways of Irish servants, as a body, are not well adapted to the requirements of fastidious English people. No offence is meant. I merely say this because it may be that an Irish servant who is a real "jew'l" to an Irish master or mistress, is underrated or misunderstood by the cold and calculating Englishman.

As in India, so in Ireland, servants on leaving their places are

furnished with written characters. The "chi's" of India are the "discharges" of Ireland. Every servant applying for a place sends or brings his or her "discharges," and very amusing these "discharges" sometimes are. I may as well tell the English reader who contemplates residence in Ireland, that an unwritten law exists that a servant's "discharge" should have on it a certificate that he or she "is discharged having been paid all wages due." I suppose, as this is almost invariably done, it is a necessary precaution in writing a "discharge." At any rate it is as well to do in Rome as the Romans do.

Bridget P——, an extraordinary person, came to us after we had been some time in Dublin, with an excellent "discharge" from a large house in the country. She was a very plain girl with superabundant spirits and a "gift of the gab" that would put many a Nationalist "mimber" to the blush. She would "always be talkin'" —to use her own expression—either to us, the other domestics, visitors at the door, orderlies, postmen, messengers, errand-boys, or failing a listener, to herself. One day a brother officer, who always blushed like a girl when speaking to one, came to call about two minutes after we left the house. Bridget opened the door to him. "Is Mrs. M—— at home?" he asked, blushing to the roots of his hair. "She is not," was the reply. "She's afther goin' out this minute wid the masther"—then, after a pause—"an' it's bad luck you have, an' afther runnin' so hard too, an' gettin' so hot! But shure they won't be gone far; you'll catch them if ye run up the sthreet and turn to yure lift!"

Bridget had an uncle and aunt living in Dublin—at least, she said so. The consequence was that she was frequently asking for an "evening out." We always thought the uncle was a most hospitable man, for he was constantly inviting her to what she called a "spree." It was not till after she had been several months in our service that we accidentally learned that the "sprees" took place in the quarters of a married non-commissioned officer of the regiment, where she met an attractive and affectionate (though, I regret to say, fickle) sergeant. We never discovered the real address of the uncle.

We were sitting in the drawing-room one night after dinner, when Bridget returned from a visit to her relations. She knocked at the drawing-room door, and entered, looking very perturbed and holding a handkerchief to her mouth. Removing the handkerchief, she disclosed the loss of one of her very large front teeth, and launched forth thus:

"Oh, ma'am! what will I do, what will I do? Shure I've bruk off me tooth, glory be to goodness! an' nobody'll speak to me wid a face like this, an' I won't be able to show me face to any one, bad luck to ut!"

"What's happened, Bridget? How did you do it?" asked my wife.

"Oh! shure an' it's me own fault entirely for goin' against me mother's wishes and entherin' a Protestant shop! D' ye know Mr. Murphy the bootmaker? Shure an' it's his shop in Blank Street, an' he a Protestant, an' his wife a frind of mine, she bein' in service wid me before she was married; an' me mother said to me, 'Bridget,' says she, 'Murphy is a Protestant,' says she, 'an' don't you have any thruck wid him.' An' I was afther leavin' me uncle's house, an' I thought I'd come home by Blank Street just to pass the time o' day to Mrs. Murphy, an' I cot me foot in the door-step and fell down in the shop an' swallowed me tooth, glory be to goodness! an' but for his bein' a Protestant it would niver have happened, an' shure I'll niver be able to show me face lookin' such a guy!"

All this was rattled off to an accompaniment of sobs, and one would have thought something very terrible had happened.

The next day my wife sent the girl off to a dentist who replaced the lost tooth by a false one, and Bridget was herself again. A few days later, however, she once more put in an appearance in the drawing-room late in the evening, this time jubilant and shaking with laughter, though the false tooth was conspicuous by its absence.

"Shure I was pickin' a chicken-bone," she said, "an' I tuk out the tooth an' put it on the plate; an' afther I finished eating' the bone I emptied the plate, bones an' tooth an' all into the fire! Oh, glory be to goodness, an' it's a great laugh I'm havin'!"

She enjoyed the joke thoroughly, now that she knew how easily a dentist could restore her lost beauty.

Bridget once informed us that an Irish priest would not visit a sick parishioner unless he was paid half-a-crown in advance. As we are "Protestants" she perhaps invented this, under the impression that it would please us. She also told us that she had a brother a priest; but she did not say whether he increased his income in this business-like manner.

By-the-way we had another Bridget—a cook—for about a fortnight. This worthy was requested to scrub the front-door steps one day. A look of horror came over her face. "Is it *me*?" she almost shrieked, "is it *me* scrub the front-door steps and be laughed at by every one in the street?"—our house stood well back from the road, and a shrubbery in the middle of the garden sheltered it from the public view—"An' indeed I will not!"

"Why, servants in London always do it!" responded my wife mildly, terrified by the virago's outburst of indignation.

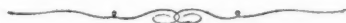
The cook's upper lip curled, and placing her arms a-kimbo she looked her mistress in the face, while with ineffable scorn and contempt she replied—"Dublin isn't London." (Poor, one-horse London!) Bridget the cook left at very short notice.

Some years later, when quartered in the South of Ireland, we got another "treasure" with excellent "discharges." She was a highly respectable widow whom I will call Mrs. Flanagan, a plain cook but

a good-looking woman, and neat and tidy for one of her race; very civil-tongued and plausible. Finding that I was consuming about four large bottles of whisky, and a plentiful supply of wine every week, I resolved one Sunday morning before going to church to mark the bottles and decanters which were kept locked up in the side-board of our dining-room. Mrs. Flanagan happened to be the only servant left in the house. On returning from church I unlocked the cupboard and found the contents of each bottle and decanter considerably diminished. In the afternoon we went out to some friends in the country, but before going I placed a large placard "stop thief," in front of the bottles, locked the cupboard, and put the key in my pocket. Almost immediately after our return home in the evening, Mrs. Flanagan came up and gave notice.

After she had left, the parlour-maid, who had always stood in wholesome awe of Mrs. F.—this parlour-maid, by-the-way, had a pleasant trick of leaving us in the middle of dinner to converse with her "young man" at the back-gate—explained the worthy woman's *modus operandi*. She used to pull out the drawer over the cupboard, put her arm through and slip the bolt of the lock; help herself freely, slip back the bolt, and replace the drawer. Doubtless a very old dodge, but worth explaining, perhaps, to the uninitiated.

I shall not write my "treasures" up to date. To none of those of whom I have written do I bear any ill-will whatever; to many I look back with feelings of affection and esteem.



A RESPITE.

I CRAVE a pause amid the fret and grief;

A season's slumber, when the charm-drawn soul

Might dream that all the clouds that round it roll

Were curtains fashioned for its sweet relief;

And every vexing book had turned its leaf

And shown life's tangled issues clear and whole,

Their purpose glorious as the aureole

That crowns His brow Who holds the heavens in fief.

But never here the seeker knows true rest,

The meed of battles fought and victories won;

New plans of time and fate must throng his breast,

Nay, bread be toiled for till the setting sun:

On—on; through storm and radiance, must he wend

His difficult path towards an unknown End.

THE TOWER BY THE SEA.

I.

IN a certain suburb of London, and in a front drawing-room of the same, at about ten o'clock on a fine autumn morning, were two persons, a man and a young girl—the former seated at the piano, the latter standing at his side.

She as lovely a girl as you might well wish to see, with her wealth of golden hair, eyes the colour of forget-me-nots, a complexion like a wild rose, and a form such as needed but a year or two more to swell out into the full rounded proportions of perfect womanhood. For she was barely eighteen, and in her exceedingly girlish dress looked even younger than she really was.

He must have been about thirty-five, and a glance at his dark eyes and hair, at his mobile features and his delicately-shaped hands and feet, at once told of foreign extraction. His features were what are termed "good," and he might possibly have been called "handsome," had not traces of small-pox marred the harmony of his face. Not that the scars were very great; only just sufficient to call forth a regret from the beholder, who had time and attention for the exterior only, and to whom the depths within were as unsought as unsuspected. Who would not trouble to gaze into those large dark eyes, whose wonderful beauty went straight to the heart of those who cared to scan their soft, earnest truthfulness.

One of his hands was slowly turning over the pages of the music before him; his other arm had glided round the waist of the girl standing behind him. He drew her somewhat nearer and looked up into her face.

She slightly inclined towards him, but did not return his gaze. Nay, she seemed to avoid it. Her clear blue eyes had no cloud of emotion on their brightness; they were fixed calmly, and apparently intently, upon the sheet of music she held in her hand.

"My Catherine!" he murmured, in the unmistakable accents of deep affection. But she made no response. Something like a stifled sigh broke from his breast.

"I had a letter from Angelo this morning," he continued after a short pause; "he will be here by the end of May—just in time for our wedding, my darling."

A sudden flush passed over her face; her hand closed tighter upon the paper she was holding, and her head turned slightly away from him.

"Is your brother still at Milan?" she asked, in the tone of one not

really caring for information, but seeking relief in the utterance of an indifferent remark.

"Yes ; but his studies are nearly ended, and he is only waiting for the fulfilment of certain formalities in order to come over and settle here in England."

"He has very great talent, you say."

"Talent—yes, he has, indeed. He was one of the first pupils in the Conservatory, and I hope and believe that he has a great and glorious future before him."

"He is much younger than you, is he not ?"

Here she turned and looked down upon him. He was gazing dreamily at the page open before him, so that she had ample time to mark the grey streaks which, here and there, were beginning to show themselves in her future husband's dark locks.

"Younger by ten years, at least ; and yet a better and an abler man than I ever was, or ever shall be."

There was no touch of envy in the tone—only a world of triumphant, glad affection.

"Ah, you will see how Angelo will brighten us all up when he comes. You don't repent of what you said about his living with us, do you ?"

"Not in the least ; only, are you sure he will like it ?"

"Could he do otherwise ? Ah, Catterina *mia*, if you had once seen Angelo, you would never have asked that question."

"Well, I meant—I only thought——"

"And just think what an advantage it will be for you," interrupted Carlo, who, like every Italian, never lost sight of the good to be gathered, no matter how deep the cloud of sentiment through which he might be gazing.

"But he is a pianist and composer ; whilst I——"

"Have one of the most perfect voices that ever fell from mortal lips. When Angelo has once heard you, you will be his inspiration. He will write for you—his name is already beginning to be known. Ah ! your voice and his talent combined must and shall take the world itself by storm."

A glow passed over the girl's face, her eyes flashed, and she involuntarily drew herself up. Who can tell what visions of golden glory gleamed across her young imagination like the flash of summer lightning gilding the bank of cold grey cloud upon the far-off horizon ? Her red lips parted, and she was just about to speak, when the door opened, and an elderly faded lady looked into the room.

"Catherine, come here for a moment. I want you to help me in choosing some curtains." Then, with a nod to Carlo, the faded lady disappeared, and the young girl, in obedience to her mother's request, left the room.

Carlo rose, sighed, and walked slowly to the window. The view was not a particularly cheering one. The ill-kept strip of garden

immediately below; then a hard macadamized road and a hedge, beyond which a dreary waste of potato fields apparently losing themselves in the grey, lowering mist indicative of the site of the world's metropolis.

Carlo stood and gazed, and as he did so, imagination began her usual trick and conjured up a well-known vision of southern loveliness and glory in terrible contrast to the grim reality before him.

A low rustic dwelling upon the slope of a hill—the wooden gallery around the upper storey thickly hung with the golden ears of maize and strings of scarlet capsicums. In front, the wreathing vines trained over a high trellis-work—“*pergolata*”—with a rustic table and benches beneath it, a shelter of mingled fruit and foliage. Beyond this, and sloping down towards the plain, the well-kept vineyard with its long, luxuriant rows, all unbroken save here and there, by the heavy foliage of a broad-boughed fig-tree, or the light, feathery branches of the peach. Behind the house, and rising abruptly from the little piazza upon which it stood, the olive wood, terrace upon terrace, until the very summit of the hill was reached, and whence a view of marvellous beauty burst upon the beholder.

Right and left, undulating hills blue with olive groves, yet, here and there, breaking out into a mass of deep red crags intermingled with sturdy chestnuts. To the north, the spurs of the Apennines rearing their bold heads higher and higher, now gently rising in rounded swell, then starting abruptly forth in all the solemn grandeur of precipice and peak—a wild chaos of stony glen and pine-crowned height terminating in snow-clad summits revealing themselves in dazzling white against the deep blue of the sky overhead. To the south, a long stretch of cornfields and orchards, dotted with villa and farm, village and homestead, the summer haze half veiling its loveliness, as if trying to fuse into one glorious expanse of colour the smiling earth and the slumbering sea beyond.

All this rose before him in its magic beauty, awakening a thousand memories in his heart, filling his eyes with sweet unbidden tears, and utterly blotting out the dank fields and dripping hedges with the lowering grey above them.

A woman had joined the man and child, and was now trying to set fire to the half-decayed heap of potato tops. The smoke rose thick, and then slowly spread itself into a canopy, ever widening, yet never rising.

Carlo's vision changed.

An autumn day amid his own bright hills—the song of the vintage echoing from slope to slope, the sunshine gilding the exuberant wealth of deepening vineleaf and luscious cluster, flushing with yet richer hue the purple and amber berries amid their glory of many-tinted foliage. One day in particular rose to his remembrance.

He and Angelo had gone up to the chestnut woods, and there, in the hollow of a rock, they, too, had kindled a fire—a fire fragrant and

flashing, fed with fir-cone and myrtle-branch, bursting out into sudden blaze with quick sharp report like a salvo of glad welcome, flinging up tiny weaths of perfumed smoke into the blue overhead, higher and higher, till lost to sight and scent in the breezy brightness around.

And there they lay amid the thick aromatic herbs, flowering shrubs around them, a cloudless sky above, and miles of some of Nature's loveliest scenery stretching away into the dreamy distance below.

How they enjoyed breaking the scarcely-ripe chestnut from its thorny husk and laying it to roast amid the crisp brittle embers! The familiar aroma rose to his nostrils, the taste to his palate; he seemed to hear the scream of the falcon from the beetling rocks overhead, and see the shimmer of the sea lying blue and golden in the distance. They had talked so much about their possible and probable future up there among those breezy heights—the large white butterflies fluttering idly from flower to flower—from the flaunting yellow everlasting to the lilac asters—leaving the bee, wiser in her generation, to banquet amid the tufts of fragrant thyme and bushes of aromatic purple heath.

The very tones of Angelo's young voice and the gleam of his dark eyes surged up with the freshness of yesterday.

Their mother had died shortly after Angelo's birth, and their father, a tolerably well-to-do small proprietor and farmer, had never married again. He had wished, and had done all he could, to bring up his sons to be tillers of the soil like himself, and for a certain time, and to a certain extent, they had followed in his steps.

But a stronger voice than his had lured them on to another path—a voice within, whose imperative whisper bade them break into song while they should have been intent on more material things—plunge into dreams, when they should have united their efforts to those of the busy, active circle around them.

Old Don Bernardo, their mother's brother and their only living relative, had done much towards bringing about this revolution of affairs, to which, after some years of spasmodic struggle, their father finally grew reconciled.

Don Bernardo was the parish priest of a near village, and, like his nephews, had been blest with an inborn love of music. Good, serene old soul, he had ever done his best to push forward his two "sons," as he loved to call them, upon the path which he felt assured they were called upon to tread.

It was he who arranged and paid for the lessons given them by the old-fashioned organist of the place; and when Carlo was judged to be fitted and ready, it was he who, at his own expense, sent him to Lucca to study under the first masters that that most musical of cities could offer. Thanks to their care, and his own talent and perseverance, Carlo became a thorough musician, learned in every resource of the art, and able to give, in his turn, such piano lessons as made him eagerly sought after by all who had sons and daughters

ambitious of distinguishing themselves upon that much-abused instrument.

Lucca did not hold him long. An English family wintering in Tuscany carried him off on their return to England, and there Carlo gradually made for himself a thoroughly solid, almost brilliant, position in that most bewildering of all modern Babylons—London. While there, his father died. Then the farm was let, and, shortly afterwards, Angelo, always by Don Bernardo's care, was sent to the Conservatory at Milan.

If Carlo had somewhat disappointed his uncle's expectations, Angelo more than fulfilled them. Before many months were over, he was declared by all his masters to be of the stuff of which the Bellinis and Mercadantes are made. The wealth of melody that flowed from the soul of that pale, dark-eyed lad was such as to awake wonder in the many who listened, and untold feeling in the few who were able to appreciate and understand.

His studies drew to a close, and before long he would join his brother in London, settle down there with him and his bride, and then set about ordering the countless and wearisome preliminaries attendant upon securing a fair and public execution of a first musical work.

Don Bernardo was dead, and had left his little fortune equally divided between the brothers—" *un bel gruzzolo*," as the Italians say, in money, a crazy old tower and a few roods of barren land somewhere down by the sea.

Good, simple old Don Bernardo! He was now, doubtlessly, enjoying in a purer world those melodies with which his earthly career had ever been haunted.

The brothers were now alone in the world, with none to cling to save each other, and in his heart of hearts Angelo felt sorely wounded at the thought that Carlo had been able to admit a third into the holy bond that united them. He had never known his mother, and all the love that would have been his had been supplied by that of his brother; all the love that would have been hers, had she lived, had been lavished upon Carlo. Carlo was everything to him.

"Carlo," Angelo had said to him up there that day upon those breezy heights, "I feel that if any one were ever to do you a great wrong, I would tear his very heart out of him."

These words seemed to ring out once more upon Carlo's ear as he stood there in that bay window looking forth upon the dreary landscape. They surged up from the depths of memory with a strange clearness, and in his heart he felt and acknowledged that the man of to-day would surely keep the promise of that long past moment, should the need of so doing ever present itself.

At this moment the door opened, and Catherine entered the room. She crossed over to where her betrothed was standing and took her place in the window beside him.

"Why, how bright you are looking, my Catherine," said Carlo, gazing at her with fond admiration; "what has happened to bring that colour to your cheek, and that extra light to your eye?"

"Oh—but you'll only laugh if I tell you!"

Carlo shook his head deprecatingly.

"Well then—but it's no great thing, after all, you know—only something that's been puzzling mamma and myself for the last fortnight."

"Well, but what was it, dear?"

"Why, the new tenants of next door must have arrived. Though when, or how, we cannot guess. I'm sure we've kept a good lookout, both of us. Probably they came ever so early this morning. The windows are all open—and— There, I declare, there's a cab drawing up at the gate; some of the new people, certainly."

"Most likely."

"Well, they can't be anything very great, after all, for the villa is let furnished. Bah, nothing but an old gentleman! How provoking!"

"Not so very old either—and—I am sure I know his face. Stay—where can I have seen it? Ah, now I remember! at Lady Tracy's concert, where my Catterina carried off the palm all undisputed, though it was her *début*."

At this instant the elderly gentleman glanced over at the bay window of the neighbouring villa while mounting the steps to the door of his own, took off his hat, bowed slightly, and then disappeared within the doorway.

Not a suspicion, nor any definitely uncomfortable thought disturbed Carlo's mind at the moment; but when, an hour or so later, he was steaming back to London, he certainly did take a leaf out of his future mother-in-law's book and set about puzzling his brains as to what could possibly have induced an elderly gentleman of the new tenant's air and apparent importance to have taken a furnished, semi-detached villa at Elling, and precisely at the time when fogs and bronchitis might reasonably be expected to put in their joint and unwelcome appearance.

II.

TWO-THIRDS, at least, of that portion of the inhabitants of London called "the world" were there; for Stanley House was one to which people gladly flocked, even when there was nothing particular to allure them, while on this especial night there was more than enough to awaken curiosity and quicken the tongues of even the most indifferent of the upper ten thousand.

The rooms presented their usual appearance. Light and flowers, gilding and velvet; the great gallery with its statues gleaming forth whitely from amid orange boughs and palms; music, warmth and perfume; costly dresses and glittering jewels, the hum of well-bred

voices, and the soft ripple of low and pleasant laughter. All these were there, stamping the assembly at Stanley House among the most hospitable and splendid of the season.

A pleasant-looking little duchess in blue velvet and diamonds was sitting beside another very plainly-dressed lady upon a *tête-à-tête*, and the position they occupied gave them the advantage of commanding the entrance of all those who passed to get to the inner reception rooms.

"Now, please, tell me who this Lady Stormington is, about whom every one is talking," said the one in plain pearl-grey silk to her companion.

"My dear, you are perhaps the only woman in all London who would venture upon such a question—who could venture upon it without running the risk of being stared at. Not know who Lady Stormington is? Now, if you had asked who she *was*——"

The smooth white shoulders rose in something very like a shrug, while her Grace's pretty mouth was momentarily drawn down at the corners. For much of her life had been passed abroad, and she had brought with her across the channel more than one of the little social peculiarities of our neighbours.

"Well, you know that I only arrived from Canada a few hours ago, I may say, so you must pardon my ignorance and answer my question. If you can't tell me who she *was*, tell me at least who she *is*. I never cared very much about groping back into people's past."

"And there you are quite right; it is sometimes unpleasant for both parties."

"Lady Stormington then——?"

"Is a viscountess with a husband of sixty—she must be under twenty—four thousand a year settled upon her, and with every prospect of waking up one morning to find herself a countess. The Earl of Rockingham, you know, is nearly ninety years old."

"No bad prospect either."

"I should think not. Why she would have been on the stage by this time if Stormington hadn't fallen in love with her and married her all in a moment, as you may say."

"Indeed!"

"Not, you know, that there was ever anything to be said against her. It is true that her mother was poor and lived at Elling when her beauty and her voice made a captive of old Stormington. He first met her at Lady Tracy's, fell in love with her, and determined to marry her."

"She is really so very beautiful, then?"

"She is indeed."

"And her voice?"

"One of the loveliest ever heard, they say. I am so glad of the opportunity of hearing her to-night. I could not—— Ah, there she is!"

A vision of loveliness appeared upon the threshold. Seldom indeed had that high white and gold doorway framed a more bewitching picture than that which now presented itself. Radiant in youthful beauty, robed in costly lace and pale blue turquoises in her hair and on her snowy neck, Lady Stormington paused for a second as if abashed at finding herself thus *vis-à-vis* that crowd of eager, admiring faces. On her husband, however, whispering a word of evident encouragement—she was leaning upon his arm—she at once moved forward with quiet grace and took her seat not very far from where the little duchess and her friend from Canada were sitting.

"She is really lovely," murmured the latter. "I no longer wonder at Lord Stormington's marrying her."

"Well, I hope he may not live to regret it. He might be her grandfather, you know."

"I have no doubt he much prefers being what he is," whispered the duke, who had just come up and was trying to squeeze himself into position behind his wife's seat among a thicket of camellias. The manœuvre succeeded, and, once comfortably ensconced, he bent forward over the two ladies.

"Stormington's a lucky fellow, and there are few men who would not be glad to change places with him."

"You among the number, perhaps," said the duchess, with a laugh, and looking up at her husband as she spoke. The reply was a glance such as would quickly have set any doubt at rest, had room for doubt ever existed.

Conversation flowed into other channels, and after a while the flux and reflux invariable to all crowded assemblies had carried the duchess and her friend into the neighbourhood of the Broadwood grand which stood at the end of the next saloon but one. They seated themselves upon an ottoman, there to await the great event of the evening.

Two gentlemen, evidently professionals, were leaning against the instrument immediately on their left. They could not thus avoid hearing the conversation carried on by them in French.

"*Poor de Sanctis*, indeed! Who would ever have thought of his coming to such an end?"

"Who, indeed? But then there was always something queer about him."

"Queer? No—sad, if you will. There was undoubtedly a vein of deep melancholy running through his character; though, for that matter, I should never have thought of its leading to such a deed."

"Morphine, was it not?"

"Yes. But, to judge from his face, he must have suffered horribly. Bah! beautiful as she is, she is not worth putting an end to one's life for. Do you think so?"

"Certainly I do not. No woman ever was—as far as I have seen."

"Of course she knows all about it?"

"I daresay she does, though she was on her wedding-tour when it happened. If she could throw him over, as she did, in that heartless way just at the very last, you may be sure his death would not affect her very deeply. I shouldn't wonder if she did not feel flattered even at his committing suicide out of despair, for love of her. Why, she let him dream on his fool's dream quite to the very last, and it was only a day or so before the younger brother's arrival that she declared off. And he, as you know, was expected just in time for the wedding."

"She seems to have been determined not to give up the teacher till she had made sure of the title."

"Poor de Sanctis! He was no bad artist, either, though not to be compared with his brother."

"So I have heard. What has become of the brother, by the way?"

"Nobody seems to know exactly. He was quite prostrated by grief—not loud, you know, but silent and brooding. It appears that he went off immediately after the funeral, nobody knows whither."

"Back to Italy, I suppose?"

"Most likely. Everything was sold off."

"Ah! I wish I had known that. I should like to have bought some little souvenir of de Sanctis. I did not——"

"Hush!—here she comes. Well, she does not look as if she had kept any particular souvenir of the man whom her faithlessness hurried to an untimely grave."

Here the last speaker commenced hastily pulling off his gloves, for it was he who was to accompany Lady Stormington, who was being led to the piano by her host. And in the wonderful voice and stream of rich melody that rose upon the air, and echoed through the rooms, the enchanted listeners forgot that Lady Stormington had not been born within their magic circle.

III.

THREE years have passed away.

A lady in deep mourning, followed by another also in black, has stepped out of a first-class railway-carriage at a little station between Spezia and Sestri Levante. Her two servants are already upon the platform, mounting guard over a pile of trunks and minor luggage. A simple and somewhat old-fashioned carriage, with a pair of stout horses and an exceedingly bronzed driver, are visible on the other side of the low railing that divides the railway premises from the dusty high-road.

The station-master advances, cap in hand—interchanges a few sentences in Italian with the younger of the ladies, opens the little wicket with his own hands to let her and her suite pass out, helps her and her companion into the vehicle, reaching after them a bundle of umbrellas and rugs, shuts to the door with a slam, then draws back a step and makes a second bow, more profound even than the first.

The copper-faced driver whips up his horses and away goes the equipage, flinging right and left thick clouds of white, swirling dust, which, after hovering awhile, finally settles upon the unhappy ilex trees with which the road is bordered.

The sun is rapidly sinking and has quite gone down before the carriage has worked its way up to the top of the heights. There is a warm flush of purple and gold over earth, sea and sky; then a gradual fading into grey, accompanied by a sudden chill. Then the stars gleam out one by one from the cloudless, solemn sky overhead, and by their soft and soothing light the travellers reach the long, low habitation to which they are bound.

"What a lovely place!" was the younger lady's exclamation as, the next morning, she stepped out on to the balcony upon which the three windows of her bedroom opened.

And lovely indeed it was. A long, low villa built of dark red brick and perched upon the very extremity of a bold promontory, at whose base the Mediterranean beat in ceaseless, soothing flow. On one side a long range of garden and orchard terraced down to the very beach, the whole backed by a dark pine-wood, with which the spur of the Apennines on which the property lay was thickly clad.

To the left a tiny bay, with its shore of smooth white sand and its pretty bathing-house; to the right, and at but a very short distance, a second smaller promontory, crowned by an old, half-ruined tower and a cluster of low out-buildings. The evident decay of the place and the aridity of the rocky waste around it, forming a striking contrast to the carefully-kept villa and its wealth of gardens and exuberant vegetation.

In front spread the broad expanse of blue waters, with here and there a white sail gleaming faintly in the dreamy distance.

There was nothing between the façade of the villa and the edge of the precipice upon which it stood, save a broad terrace cut in the living rock, and protected by a marble balustrade ornamented with large vases filled with flowering plants.

The dark red face of the cliff itself bristled with aloes, and out of the bold clefts numberless oleanders flung their lithe branches. There was an air of solitude and retirement over the whole place, but quite unmingled with anything like loneliness or melancholy. How could it be lonely with blue sky and sunshine, rippling waters and blooming plants, light and perfume, with the song of the wild bird floating forth from groves of tufted orange and ilex, with the hum of the bee amid the flowers, with the mazy dance of the yellow butterfly in the pure, warm air? There was everything conducive to peace and repose: nothing to awaken or recall sadness or grief.

Catherine—Lady Stormington no longer, but Countess of Rockingham; her father-in-law having died just three weeks before her husband—seated herself upon one of the broad marble steps leading to the gardens below, and, head leant upon hand, gazed out upon the

scene before her. The flickering shadows of a large grass plant in the vase above her fell softly upon and around her.

How peaceful was everything on earth, sea and sky!

The folds of her black dress, which lay broad and sweeping upon the gleaming white of the marble, and the cloud upon her brow were the only dark things visible in all that serene and sunny landscape.

The tepid air, too, was growing heavy with the perfume of the flowers with which, from time to time, the acrid odour of brine mingled. The weary void which, since some time, had been making itself felt in Catherine's heart, seemed suddenly to increase strangely as she sat there amid all that wealth of exulting nature.

"Life is but a heavy burden, after all," she murmured to herself. And then she went on pondering as to how it was possible to feel discontented and sad as she did with so much at her command, when, but a year or two ago, one fiftieth part of what was now hers would have been too wild to have even dreamed of.

"Kate—Kate," cried a voice from the house, "how can you sit out in the broiling sun in that manner? And without a parasol, too. You'll ruin your complexion."

Mrs. Mellicott vanished from the window only to reappear almost immediately upon the terrace with a sunshade in one hand and an enormous black straw hat in the other.

"There, my love," said she, crossing to where her daughter was sitting and depositing both the articles in her lap; "these will protect you a little—though, if you would follow my advice, you wouldn't stir out of doors with the sun blazing down out of the sky like this. Dear me, how much pleasanter it would be if there were only a few clouds about! Do come in, my dear; the house is perfectly charming. I've been all over it, and some of the rooms are really splendid."

"I'm sure I'm glad you like it, mother; only don't ask me to go indoors—I seem to breathe so much freer out here."

"The rooms have been well-aired, I can assure you: there's not the sign of stuffiness in any of them. The great salon in the middle there is absolutely perfect, though there *are* some terribly scandalous pictures upon the ceiling. I'm sure I don't know what we can do with them. I've been puzzling my brains to make out a way of veiling them. And then there's a vase upon the staircase—it's quite outrageous! What can we do when the people begin to call upon us?"

"I'm not sure that there are any people in the neighbourhood, mother; and if there are, I hope they will keep away and not come disturbing us?"

"Disturb us! Why, my dear, you don't mean—"

"Yes; disturb us. We are here for your health, mamma, and a little, perhaps, for my own—and I won't have you worried with visitors."

"Oh, just a friend or two—people of our rank, you know—to an

occasional quiet little dinner and a pleasant evening. I do so hope you'll get a piano. It's my duty, you know, to help you to keep up your position."

The words were as well meant as they were ill chosen. A deeper cloud passed over Catherine's features, and she rose from her seat.

"I wonder what's in that dismal old tower down there?" said Mrs. Mellicott, shading her eyes with one hand so as to obtain a better view; "it looks just the very place for bandits; I see, by the way, that all our lower windows are fitted with iron bars. I suppose it is necessary, but it looks queer; we shall have to get used to it. But I am not——"

"Of course we shall, mother. Here comes Cesare."

"Yes—that dreadful servant. He would persist in talking his gibberish to me this morning. What does he want now?"

He came to say that breakfast was ready, and Mrs. Mellicott followed her daughter into the house.

* * * * *

Weeks wore on quite uneventfully: outwardly, at least.

To the elder lady's great disgust, not a visitor had put in an appearance at the villa, and the peasants and others immediately around them seemed in no wise impressed with the fact of her daughter's being Countess of Rockingham. On the whole, therefore, Mrs. Mellicott's powers were not heavily taxed in "keeping up their position."

The weather had set in intensely hot, and the ladies, after returning from their morning bath, generally kept indoors until evening came on. They then sat out upon the terrace and watched the stars peep out one by one to mirror themselves in the broad blue expanse below.

A curious thing had taken place, however. A sort of weary restlessness had laid hold of Lady Rockingham, leaving her neither peace nor repose, save in such time as she passed there upon that terrace; and when there, her eyes would fix themselves as if fascinated upon the old ruined tower on the opposite promontory with an unconquerable obstinacy for which she could in no wise account.

The doctor said that the restlessness was a first effect of the sea air, to which she was unused, and that it would soon wear off; and Miladi was fain to accept his solution as the true one, even against her own better judgment.

One evening they were sitting as usual on the terrace, worn and weakened by the heat which had that day been unusually oppressive. A sort of lassitude seemed to have extended itself over the animals and plants, for the former remained silent in their leafy retreats, while the latter hung their heads towards mother earth as if vainly seeking from her refreshment in their weariness.

The moon had just set behind the pine-clad ridge, the stars shimmered down from the blue overhead, and responsive shimmers gleamed upwards from the broad bosom of the slumbering waters; the fireflies

danced amid the orange boughs, the breath of the gardenia floated heavily upon the night ; not a sound was heard save the measured swish of the sleepy tide below.

Even Mrs. Mellicott seemed to feel the mysterious influence, for her tongue, usually so active, remained mute, and she sat there following the fireflies' flight, as they broke from out the gloom of the foliage to flash for a moment and then once more disappear.

Suddenly there broke upon the breathless night a flood of harmony so wild and wonderful as to make the hearts of both beat quickly, while Catherine's eyes filled with unbidden tears, and a strange shiver ran through her whole frame.

The sounds flowed on unbroken—waves wild and eccentric—now soaring into a strain such as angels might have rejoiced in—now sinking into a chaos of chords more like the wail of a band of lost souls than any music produced by mortal hand.

"Good gracious, Kate, whatever can it be?" whispered Mrs. Mellicott, on the performance coming to a sudden and unexpected end.

Where does it come from?"

"From the old tower over there. It is evidently an organ, and—yes, if you look steadily, you will see a faint light in one of the upper windows."

She shivered as she spoke and gazed, and mechanically drew a flimsy shawl around her.

"But who lives there? Can any one live in such a disreputable-looking sort of a place?"

"Yes; a poor, half-witted man, so Cesare told me, whose name nobody seems to know. He has been living there off and on for months, and came no one knows whence."

"Who can he be?"

"The peasants seemed to say that he is a priest; but I don't quite remember. He is certainly a splendid musician."

"He might play in Christian hours, and not try to frighten his betters out of their wits with his musical whims. I feel creepy all over!"

So did Lady Rockingham, but she said nothing about what she felt. It was something all too strange to speak of, and, besides, her mother would never have been able to understand her.

"There—he's off again, I declare!"

Once more the weird strain broke upon the listening night, to float in myriad voices through the darkness—calling, jeering, praying, conjuring—every human passion, good and bad, seeming to find its interpreter in the strange medley of the terrible and the grotesque, the plaintive and the defiant; the leaping forth into warm life, the sudden sinking into chill death.

But it did not last long, only once more rose again into the former soaring melody that seemed as if it must be bearing upwards the entire soul of the player upon its mighty pinions.

Its effect was strange upon Catherine. A wild yearning urged her to join her voice with the soaring sound, but a stronger power forbade her doing so. More than once she opened her parched lips, but no note could she bring forth; a convulsive shudder mastered her whole frame, and she sank faint and fearing upon the seat from which, in her eagerness, she had risen.

The music ceased abruptly. It seemed to Catherine to be followed by a cry—a cry of sharp anguish such as a bird would utter if roused from its dream of sunshine and roses to find itself in the cruel clutch of the night-prowler.

Mrs. Mellicott had heard no cry, and, though her daughter strainingly listened for it to be repeated, nothing more was heard save the monotonous swish-swash of the waves below as they crept up to die upon the white sand.

Soon after, the light, too, vanished from the tower window. Lady Rockingham gave a sigh of relief; she herself could not have told why. The darkness seemed to have increased, and she felt a sudden desire to quit the spot. The lamp-light streaming out from the windows of the salon looked cheerful and inviting. She rose to go indoors.

Phantom music seemed to be floating around her—unsummoned spirits to be hovering amid the gloom. No wonder, then, that, without knowing why, she echoed the shrill scream uttered by Mrs. Mellicott, who, clutching at her daughter's arm, cried out: "There, Catherine, there—behind you!"

She pointed to the cluster of magnolias. Catherine turned. There, gleaming out from the dark foliage, were two eyes, fixed and fiery, never blinking, but staring as if to transfix the affrighted women with their gaze.

Neither moved, and Catherine's blood ran cold. Happily, at the same moment, Cesare came up; he had heard the cry through the widely-opened windows of the saloon where he was preparing tea, and hurried out to see what was the matter.

"There is somebody among the bushes there!" whispered Lady Rockingham, on his coming up; while Mrs. Mellicott seized hold of his arm in a way that showed how dismay could, on occasion, scare away dignity.

"Impossible!" replied the man; but, almost ere he could utter the word, he too caught sight of the glittering orbs.

Then from out the magnolias followed a sharp, snapping sound, not unlike the cocking of a pistol, only reiterated a dozen times or more, and mingled with strange guttural mutterings and a rustling amid the leaves. Cesare, too, began to feel weak about the knees; and who knows how the scene might have ended, had not the boughs suddenly parted, and an enormous horned owl soared forth and, with a loud, long-drawn cry, floated away over the heads of the spell-bound gazers to vanish into the surrounding gloom.

Impressed as she had been by the mysterious music, it was only natural that Lady Rockingham should be extremely anxious to learn something more definite about the musician. But she was able to gather little or nothing.

For weeks at a stretch nothing would be either seen or heard at the tower; and then, suddenly, some night, when the night-fishers were out in their boats, would the strange, wild music come floating over the waters, and the faint yellow gleam would be visible in one of the upper windows of the lonely ruin. Not knowing by what name to call him, the people had christened him "*il Frate*"—either from the fact of the former owner of the tower having been a priest, or, more probably, perhaps, from his lonely and unsocial mode of life. For he wore no monastic garb—only plain black clothes, utterly shabby and wholly uncared for. From time to time he would make his appearance among the country people, buying from them such coarse provisions as they could supply, and which he, with his own hands, always took from the bearers at the gate of the little court with which his dilapidated tower was surrounded on three sides. The fourth side of the tower stood on the sheer edge of the precipice upon which it was built, and a line let down from the broken battlements would have fallen amid the breakers and the jagged rocks below.

Within the precincts of the place none were ever allowed to penetrate. The "*Frates*" avoided all intercourse except the most unavoidable, but was civil and soft-spoken to those with whom he was forced to speak. He was evidently not poor; nay, in the eyes of the good peasants he passed for rich, for he had had an organ brought from Lucca and set up in the tower—an organ reported to have cost a large sum by the men who brought it over and erected it.

Only one particularly strange circumstance had been remarked; whenever he happened to meet a woman, he would turn sharply out of his way, and, on doing so, had been heard more than once to mutter strangely to himself. This same fact might, possibly, have aided in the bestowal of the title of "*Frates*"; though, as more than one would remark, "there were few among the real clergy that led so exemplary a life as did the recluse of that solitary tower." In short, he was well-spoken of by all, and the liberality he was ever ready to show to the needy, amply made up in the public opinion for the chariness of his words.

Mrs. Mellicott, after "puzzling her brains" over the mysterious music and yet more mysterious musician for a while, ended by getting tired of the whole question. She hardly forgot the adventure with the owl quite so readily.

But she had her own health to attend to, to regulate all the especial minutiae of her baths and diet, as laid down by a medical celebrity summoned over from Sarzano for that particular purpose; and all this, joined to the arrival of a box of fashionable novels and the latest crewel patterns, effectually did the business. The good

lady sank gently into a routine of life which, as far as ease and luxury were concerned, left nothing to be desired.

Catherine, on the contrary, grew more and more restless, and appeared to be utterly incapable of interesting herself in anything. Without herself knowing why, she would spend long hours gazing across the narrow ravine at the tower beyond, with a vague yearning in her heart to catch but a momentary glimpse of its unknown occupant.

But no token or sign did she ever see—only at rare intervals did the sickly yellow light show itself at the upper window—nor since that first wondrous night had the unearthly music ever made itself heard.

One morning Catherine had risen somewhat earlier than usual, after passing a feverish, sleepless night. Listless and even more dispirited than usual, she had with difficulty got through two-thirds of the long summer's day, and had gone out upon the terrace, as was her wont, to take her place under the grateful shade of the broad-boughed magnolia. The oppression, moral and physical, which she was suffering under were all but unbearable.

Mrs. Mellicott had retired to her rooms with a headache and a sensational novel.

A pile of heavy white cloud was slowly welling up upon the horizon, blotting out with stealthy pace the intense blue of the sky. At long intervals the faint roll of distant thunder made itself heard, but as yet, no breath stirred either blossom or bough. The cigala drummed forth her weary, monotonous music with ceaseless energy, uninterrupted by any other sound. She had it all her own way, and was seemingly making the most of it.

Lady Rockingham gazed longingly down at the cool blue waters below, the heaving was so subdued and gentle as to leave not even the tiniest fringe of silver upon the sands they kissed. Then again she fixed her eyes upon the tower-crowned ridge, and a curious impulse urged her to try and trace the eccentric path which led upwards from the strand. She tried again and again. Impossible! Rock and shrub, ridge and hollow, seemed to take a malicious pleasure in baffling her.

Then, with a sudden impulse, she rose from her seat and hastily began to descend the broad marble steps. Down, down, down, crossing terrace after terrace till, at length, she reached the little gate opening upon the rocky strand.

Out among the masses of dark rock with which it was encumbered—masses thundered down from the cliffs overhead in times gone by, and now strewn amid the chaos of wave-worn stone and boulder, that the sea in its moment of fury, had cast forth from its breast. Away across them all, her delicate feet heedless of the roughness of the ground over which she sped, impelled onwards by a will which seemed to reach her from without, and which she felt every moment less able to resist.

She was soon amid the stunted brushwood, and there lay the path before her. Now through thickets of myrtle and juniper—now losing itself in a bed of thyme; here winding around a gigantic rock—there dipping gently across a miniature ravine in which the coarse grass grew thickly, and from whose water-worn sides the broom and heath sprang. On, on, on, ever mounting, flushed and breathless, her limbs aching wearily, yet the nameless impulse ever hurrying her onwards.

With panting breast, and with a strange wild glitter in her eyes, she at last reached the summit, and halted upon the narrow platform upon which the tower stood. No entrance to the little yard was to be seen, so she skirted the corner with a strange feeling of having been there before, and stopped in front of the low wicket gate. Without a second's hesitation she pushed it open and entered. Desolation on every hand—an overgrowth of rank, poisonous-looking weeds, across which human footsteps, but not human industry, had frayed a species of path. Catherine traversed the enclosure with swift step—the unseen influence making itself more and more powerfully felt with every second that elapsed.

She entered the tower.

A large square room, all unfurnished save by a rude stool at the side of the ash-encumbered hearth, and a coarse plate or two upon the stone mantel-shelf above. The light streamed in through the open doorway, making the discomfort and desolation around only the more apparent. In the further corner, a flight of stone stairs leading to the floor above.

Urged on by the same imperious impulse, Lady Rockingham crossed the unswept stone pavement, and noiselessly mounted. She found herself in a room the exact counterpart of the one below, with a similar staircase leading to the storey above. But there was no chimney, and in its place stood an organ. There was a wretched bed, too, in one corner, a couple of chairs, and, in the centre, a massive table covered with sheets of manuscript music.

At this table, his face buried in his hands, sat a man. In obedience to the hidden power which had now taken complete possession of her, Lady Rockingham, her eyes fixed upon the being before her, stepped close up to the table and rested her frail, white hands upon its rough and dusty edge.

Here she paused, gazing mutely and expectantly.

Her golden hair had escaped from its confinement and flowed in a now tangled mass down upon her shoulders and on to her dark dress—her bosom was heaving with the unwonted exertion, and her azure eyes were riveted more and more fixedly upon the bowed head and the black, grey-streaked locks before her.

Her features expressed neither wonder nor embarrassment—a power unspeakably stronger than her own will was swaying every motion. She could only gaze and wait.

Minutes rolled on—though she could not have told if they were seconds or centuries. Neither stirred. No sound broke the silence save the heavy breathing of the man within, and the fitful growl of the thunder without. She saw and marked everything: but it was as if she had been a third and indifferent person, a careless looker-on, and not herself in any sense of the term.

A ray of sunshine suddenly broke through the window and, falling full upon her head, enveloped it in a halo of glory. At the same instant the man raised his head, and his wild dark eyes met the full and silent gaze of his victim.

But there was neither surprise on his face, nor tremor in his voice, as, after a moment's pause, he said: "Ah, you have come at last, have you?" There was nothing either in word or tone to terrify; yet, on hearing his voice, a shiver ran through Lady Rockingham's whole form. Her face grew pale as death. The voice seemed like the echo of one she had silenced for ever.

The two gazed on at each other, silent and motionless.

Once more the low roll of the thunder broke forth, rising from the sea apparently, and rumbling slowly over their heads towards the mountains. The sunny ray was suddenly blotted out and an ominous gloom usurped its place.

"For I knew you would come, sooner or later," he repeated. "He told me so."

He rose, and walked slowly round the table to where she was standing. Her eyes followed his steps, but she still remained motionless.

"Come—let me look at you well."

He drew her, with a sudden and almost brutal motion, aside towards the foot of the stairs leading to the roof above. Here the light was somewhat clearer.

His long thin fingers clasped round her white, blue-veined wrist in a grasp of steel. "I have passed many weary hours in trying to picture to myself what you are like. Let me see if you are worth the price he paid for you."

He closely scanned her form and features as he spoke, never for a second relaxing the cruel grip in which he held her. She stood passive as wax under his scrutiny.

"Yes—your face is an angel's; your heart—your heart must be that of a demon!"

He flung her violently from him as he spoke. She reeled, and would have fallen had not the rough stone wall behind saved her. A crash of thunder burst immediately overhead, while at the same instant a bright blue glare flashed with blinding intensity through the gloom.

"Do you hear his voice? He is crying aloud for vengeance—vengeance upon you, his murderess—for all your golden hair and azure eyes! You lured him on to his ruin; you broke the nobles

heart that ever beat—yes, in very wantonness—stamped out the life of him who worshipped you. You are in my power now—do you understand?—in my power! And I am Carlo de Sanctis' brother."

He was terrible to look upon, with his blazing eyes, as he gathered himself together like a wild beast about to spring. Catherine closed her eyes; it was all that she could do, for the spell was upon her, making her as clay in the hands of the potter.

The storm broke forth in earnest—crash following crash, gleam leaping forth upon gleam, till the whole universe seemed to reel with deafening roar and blinding glare. The warring of the elements appeared to mock at the fury of the man.

Suddenly the maniac—for maniac he now certainly was—seized her in his arms and, like a tiger carrying off his prey, bounded up the narrow stair leading to the flat roof of the tower.

He sprang upon the crumbling battlement, holding his burden high over his head with the strength of madness. Above, the raging tempest; below, the seething waters lashed into fury and leaping vainly upwards as if eager to get at their promised prey. "Are you ready to meet him?" Angelo shouted hoarsely into her ear. The words scarcely reached her, so terrible was the commingled din of the elements. But she had guessed their purport. She shivered in his grasp as a lamb shivers in the hands about to slay it.

"Hark to his call! He is weary of waiting. I come, brother—I come; we are coming, both of us. Listen to the death-song." Then he broke out into the same wild melody that had been heard floating weirdly up from the spot upon which the maniac now bade her say farewell to earthly life for ever.

The shrill notes rose to a shriek as they mingled with a thousand voices of the contending sea and sky.

Suddenly he stopped, and the unhappy woman opened her eyes. All around was enveloped in gloom. A blue flash lit up the scene for an instant with its fierce glare. For an instant only, but long enough to render visible a horrified group upon the terrace of the villa, the arms wildly extended in the direction of the tower.

And amid those collected there stood a mother, impotent to save her golden-haired child from the grasp of the madman.

Involuntarily Catherine turned away her gaze. It fell upon the low doorway that gave access to the platform. There lay safety—life, perhaps—respite at least! Ah, could she but reach it! But the long wiry arms closed round her like hoops of steel, precluding all hope of escape.

Yet still she gazed on, fixedly, as if she expected help to come thence—gazed on as if hope were not already dead in her heart—gazed on without even herself knowing why.

"Are you ready?" shrieked Angelo once more. Receiving no reply, he looked into her face. He followed the direction of her eyes. Then a sudden shivering seized him; an inarticulate sound issued

from his parted lips ; the pale face grew livid—the encircling arms relaxed.

Catherine fell heavily against the battlement, while the maniac flung himself wildly upon his knees.

There he knelt, his outstretched arms—the thin, steely fingers widely extended—towards the low doorway.

“Brother,” broke from him at last—“brother ! why—why do you look at me like that ? Why do you frown ? Why do your eyes gleam at me in anger ?”

Catherine gazed in spell-bound horror. She saw nought but the low doorway ; but she shivered as do those who feel themselves in an unseen presence.

“Brother ! brother !” broke forth in a wailing shriek. “Look not on me so—you scorch my very heart ; and I loved you so—I loved you so ! Have pity, have pity !”

He sank his head upon his breast for a moment and remained silent, breathing convulsively, as one struggling for life. Catherine durst not move. She felt that, had she done so, the man would have leaped upon her like a leopard on its prey. There she stood motionless, almost breathless, trying vainly to calculate the time that must elapse before aid could arrive.

The maniac lifted his head once more.

“Still there !” he murmured. “And pitiless still ! Ah, your eyes, your cruel, cruel eyes are piercing my brain like red-hot iron ! Ah, have mercy, have mercy !”

He flung himself forwards upon his face, then suddenly started and looked up. “Brother ! brother !” he shrieked. “Ah, do not leave me thus ! One look of love—but one—for our dead mother’s sake—for the love of——” He sprang up and staggered towards the doorway. “For the love that——”

He never finished the phrase. There was a rush of feet upon the stairs, and the next moment Angelo was secured by the men from the villa.

Lady Rockingham had fainted.

* * * * *

A long hospital ward, few patients occupying the long unbroken line of white beds ; two “Sisters,” however, grouped at the head of the one at the further end of the apartment. One on her knees beside it, the other bending over its occupant and wiping the gathering dews from the clammy forehead.

“If the doctor would only come !” she murmured.

Almost at the same instant he entered, followed by two attendants. He walked straight up to the bed and bent for a second over the patient. “Not an hour to live,” he said, in reply to the Sister’s mute inquiry. “If the Signora Inglese does not come soon, she will be too late.”

"She is always here by two," put in one of the men.

"It wants seven minutes," rejoined the doctor, after pulling out and consulting his watch.

"Poor fellow!" sighed the Sister.

"Lucky fellow, rather!" retorted the physician. "Is it not better to go off quietly in a coma like that than to live on a maniac? For maniac he must have been. No man that was ever born could pull through such a brain-fever and retain his senses."

"God's will be done!" ejaculated the Sister.

The door opened, and a lady in black entered. Though young, her hair was white as snow. The terrible moments passed in the tower with the maniac, succeeded by hours of unconsciousness, had wrought the change in her. Her expression was sad almost to melancholy; but there was a grave and subdued charm about it never before seen there. It seemed to say that she had passed through a furnace of affliction, and had done with the world and its frivolities.

She, too, came straight up to the bed. Her passage was scarcely noticed by the patients, so used had they become to her daily visits.

"You are just in time, miladi," said the doctor.

The Sister who had been standing noticed a sudden change in the patient's face. She read it aright, and, laying down sponge and towel, sank upon her knees. Lady Rockingham followed her example. The three men withdrew in silence. Twenty minutes later all was over.

And thus began Catherine's hospital life, which many a sufferer has had good and abundant cause to bless.

A. BERESFORD.

OCEANO NOX.

(*From Victor Hugo.*)

ALAS! alas! how many mariners,

How many captains, starting joyously

Whilst not a breath the gentle billow stirs,

And not a sound disturbs the sleeping sea,

Lured on by cruel fortune wide and far,

Have vanished on a night that knew no star.

And none may tell where lie the noble heads
Hurled on through endless space to unknown shore,
Lost on the trackless waste no footstep treads,
Through all the ages to return no more!
How many loving hearts have ceased to beat,
Whilst watching vainly for those wandering feet.

At times old comrades, round the cheerful blaze,
Will speak of you: some ancient tale retrace;
And whilst they talk of old adventurous days,
The shades of death are lying on your face!
They join your names in laughter and in jest,
Whilst on your lips sea-wrack and mosses rest.

They ask "Where are they?" jesting—"Are they kings
In isles of bliss?" And then there comes a day
When you are quite forgot. Time's ruthless wings
Have swept the old familiar forms away.
Where falls a shadow—deeper shadows fall—
Oblivion hides you very soon from all.

All have their daily round—their work, their lives—
Only on some dark night with storms at sea,
Weary with waiting, white-haired widowed wives
Rake up the ashes of dead memory
From heart and hearth—and speak again with tears
Of those whose names had not been breathed for years.

And when their eyelids close, there will be none
To recollect—no willow tree will weep
Sad leaves—no name be writ on mossy stone,
On humble cross no ivy garland creep:
Nor e'en the beldam croon for those at sea
Her evening chaunt in dull monotony.

Where are they, sailors to the deep gone down?
Oh, you have direful secrets, cruel waves!
You whisper them when clouds of tempest frown,
And wives and mothers weep unhallowed graves.
Yours are the mournful voices that we hear
When tow'rds the shore by night our steps draw near.

C. E. MEETKERKE.

THE HÔTEL DU CHEVAL BLANC.

IT is not a picturesque building. The dwelling-house, a dirty grey in colour and flat-sided as a brick, runs along one side of the courtyard; on those at right angles to it, various sheds, barns and other outhouses are irregularly disposed; the fourth is bounded by a high stone wall, over which the elms in the ducal park beyond lift fragrant canopies of cool green leaves.

It is true that, as I see it, this unlovely spot is not without redeeming graces. The glow of a continental summer envelops and transfigures it. The dull grey and brown mass lies steeped in sunlight filtered through an atmosphere clear and sparkling as crystal; and over all arches, far beyond the scope of our island heaven, a dome of the darkest and yet most brilliant blue. I feel the warm air touch my face as I think of it, and I hear the voice of Madame Malet, the landlady, calling across the yard to her son Victor, who is now at play with the "English demoiselle."

The two children have taken possession of an empty waggon drawn up on one side of the court. Victor, with a huge whip, which he can hardly lift, and strange guttural noises, in excellent imitation of the local carters, is driving an imaginary team. Behind him sits the English demoiselle, her blue eyes shining, her pink cheeks pinker than usual with enjoyment of the expedition. She winds one arm lovingly round the neck of Fido, the mongrel house-dog, who, all unused to such blandishments, turns on his foreign friend, in mingled gratitude and wonder, two moist, pathetic eyes.

"Of what are you thinking?" screams Madame Malet, in a voice as melodious as the cry of one of her own hens. "Are you, then, mad to hold yourselves like that in the sunshine at the hour which now is? Do you desire to have a sunstroke? Victor, arrive this instant! Mademoiselle, you will do yourself an injury. Come—enter, both of you, and I will give you a *galette*."

At the same instant, from the open window on the second floor, a very smooth brown head is suddenly protruded, and a shrill voice calls out, in accents which sound sharp and clipped after the foreign vocables—

"Miss Julia, come in this hinstant! Whatever would your ma say? And do look at your dress!"

The children, who have jumped down from the cart, run across the yard and disappear into the house. Fido, who has jumped down after them, stretches himself to slumber in the shade. The tinkling of a piano floats out from the open window on the second floor. It is "Mees Smeete" practising her scales with youthful energy, which even the great heat does not exhaust. Until it abates, the rest of the English lodgers are keeping very quiet, and towards evening will sally

forth in a body for one of those long rambles over hill and dale in which they daily indulge.

Ah, what delightful rambles these were through that fruitful Norman land! blooming with gardens, and orchards, and woodland, and watered by bright streams gliding smoothly on, foaming impetuously past the scattered mills and homesteads. The air grew cooler and cooler as we wandered on; the glowing pink above us faded into grey; sometimes the perfumed darkness of a summer's night gathered over all things before we returned tired and hungry to the Cheval Blanc; too tired to be captious about the unadorned ugliness of our dining-room, ill-lighted by two flickering candles, hungry enough to sup with relish on artichokes, eggs, freshly-made *galettes*, and nice milk served in an earthenware *terrine* about the size of an ordinary English foot-bath.

One day in the week the drowsy calm of the courtyard was dispersed by an inrush of noise and bustle from the market-place outside. Early in the morning the two-wheeled carts from all the villages round came pouring into the town, each bearing its freight of blue-smocked men and white-capped women. Then followed a great unpacking of garden and dairy produce, and betimes the market-place was fitted with stalls sheltered by canvas awnings, or gay umbrellas, under which eggs, fowls, butter, cheese, vegetables and fruit were temptingly outspread before the eyes of the townspeople.

The men congregated mostly round the sacks of corn, which were ranged in rows before the Hôtel de Ville, and a low deep hum came from that quarter; whereas, a very Babel of shrill vociferation seemed to cleave the air above the stalls where the women chattered over their wares.

To the foreign observer, indeed, a good deal of time appeared needlessly squandered over that duel of words which invariably preceded the purchase of the smallest article; but then on bright summer mornings how pleasantly such time was wasted! Even a sober English buyer might well be tempted to argue the price of a peach or an apple with a vendor as blooming as her rosy fruit. Most Norman peasant women, young and middle-aged, are pleasant to look upon; erect, with well-set heads and oval faces, straight noses, and fine dark eyes steadily surveying you from under thoughtful brows. Such comeliness is very well set off by a diadem of snowy muslin and crisp white lace, and the long gold pendants which have drooped from the ears of successive generations.

On market mornings there was an almost unceasing rattle of wheels and hoofs under the low archway which led from the "Place" to the courtyard of the Cheval Blanc, and by mid-day it was quite blocked by row after row of empty spring-carts. The male owners thereof all dined more or less noisily in the big kitchen, or in very warm weather in a large open shed, made beautiful for the occasion with green boughs, and surnamed "*la salle verte*."

Then would Madame Malet, in her rôle of hostess, shine to full advantage—or disadvantage. The tones of her voice encouraging her guests, or rallying her maids, filled the courtyard with discordant echoes. She was here, there, and everywhere, distributing smoking dishes of soup and *bouilli*, huge jugs of sour cider, and even at times jests as heavy as her tread.

Her husband's less conscious part was to sit at the head of the dinner-table, and set the *convives* a good example in the way of eating and drinking—a task which he fulfilled with his usual placidity. A fat dark man, with a kindly face and sleepily gentle manner, he was in demeanour as in disposition the opposite of his wife; fortunately so, or life at the Cheval Blanc might have been unendurable. Not that poor Madame Malet was in reality a shrew. All this sound and fury signified nothing but the effervescence of an excitable temperament.

She was a big, clumsy, fair—or, lest I be utterly misunderstood, let me say blonde—woman, with a large nose, and great loosely-hanging lips. A kindly gleam would often lighten her pale blue eyes, generally clouded by a Martha-like anxiety about household matters, and a joyless view of life in general. At one time she had so far mistaken her vocation as to aspire to be a sick-nurse at the Hôtel-Dieu, but M. Malet's intervention had fortunately altered a resolution so unfavourable to the inmates of that establishment. Yet Madame Malet had a tender heart for the sick and the weak. I can see her now standing in the most ungraceful of attitudes beside our dinner-table on the days when the *menu* included a freshly-roasted joint, thrusting unceremoniously a large spoon between the carver and the dish, whilst she called out in tones of harsh command: "*Pour la poitrine, s'il-vous-plait*," which signified that before any one was served, a wine-glassful of the crimson gravy must be secured for a young invalid-friend of Madame Malet's.

It was apparently the power of expression, not of feeling, that was lacking. With eyes full of sympathetic tears, Madame Malet would rend the ears and shatter the nerves of the victim she sought to succour. Even towards Victor, her only child, and the very apple of her eye, her bearing was not softened. On the contrary, he was more hustled and shouted at than any one else. This, her well-meant fashion of urging him along the right path, might have goaded him into quite the opposite direction, had he not been happily endowed with a heavily phlegmatic and obtuse disposition, which enabled him to receive with more than indifference the tempests of indignation and reproof which periodically descended on him.

He was an unattractive-looking child, who had inherited his mother's hay-coloured hair and general mealiness of complexion. He was dedicated to the Virgin, a fact which always perplexed English and Protestant observers who could detect no outward or visible sign of this benign connection save in the colour of Victor's garments, which

were always scrupulously blue, in honour of his patron. The devotion which was her due he paid vicariously through his mother. It was she who derived the keenest satisfaction from her son's religious privileges. She used to point with joy and pride to a plaster image of the Madonna, crowned with artificial flowers, that kept watch and ward beside Victor's bed, as well as to a trousseau of smart clothes, and a wonderful collection of presents of various kinds slowly accumulating for what seemed to be the *ultima Thule* of Madame Malet's earthly hopes—the day of Victor's First Communion. Madame Malet would handle these treasures almost tenderly as she displayed them to the English demoiselle and to the smooth-haired lady's-maid, who surveyed them with that mixture of curiosity and contempt she assigned to foreign things and persons.

Victor himself cared for none of these things, and did not affect to do so. He was not devotionally inclined, and his only manifestation of religious zeal was his habit of shouting "Alleluia" lustily when he played at horses on Sundays or holy days. It failed unfortunately to satisfy Madame Malet's standard of religious observance.

"Hein! your alleluias!" she would exclaim bitterly, with the intensely ironical intonation her son's shallow devices so often provoked. "Rose, conduct Victor to the mass this instant." And to the mass this ward of the Madonna would be forthwith conveyed, loudly weeping and protesting as he went.

He was not more remarkable for his learning than for his piety. I well remember, on a bright summer evening, his inglorious return from the distribution of prizes at the village school. The reward of merit is lavish on such occasions. Everybody, good, bad and indifferent, receives something, and the really deserving pupils are laden with more books in gorgeous bindings than they can carry, and crowned with a corresponding number of exquisitely neat laurel wreaths.

Victor entered the courtyard with a small thin book and a solitary wreath, the meagre portion of the dunce. He was himself disposed to make the best of it, and he presented the book with a self-conscious air to his mother, and even ventured in true orthodox fashion to hang the wreath upon her head. It was no easy feat to accomplish, for Madame Malet, stiff with displeasure, made no effort to assist him, and he succeeded, by standing on tiptoe, in so placing it, that it hung all awry over one eyebrow, imparting the last fine touch to the look of grim and speechless disgust with which she contemplated these tokens of her son's proficiency.

Regularly every morning a quaint little figure came through the archway. This was Madame Martin, who gave daily lessons to Made-moiselle Smeete (*Anglicé*, Smith), the elder sister of the English demoiselle. Madame Martin had a tiny chocolate-coloured face, supported by a disproportionately long and thin neck, and bore, probably

in consequence of this, a striking resemblance to a tortoise. She had a bird-like profile, with a sweet-tempered mouth and two prominent and sparkling black eyes. She corrected the exercises of her pupil, and kept time beside her while she practised on the piano with a minute blue-veined hand, stained and seamed by household labour.

Her marriage, seeing that in her maiden days she had been governess to the Duke's daughter, was not so socially illustrious as might have been expected. On the other hand, it was highly romantic, unlikely as that may appear to those who have not observed how superior is the destiny of everyday life to the prejudices of novel-writers and novel-readers, and how constantly she selects for the heroes and heroines of her most interesting stories persons devoid either of youth or beauty.

It was under the screen of sacred music, or rather of its cultivation, that Cupid assailed Madame Martin.

In the village choir which she directed there was a young carpenter with a sweet tenor voice and two melting dark eyes. Mademoiselle Guérin, as she then was, fell in love with this engaging chorister. He returned her affection, and finally proposed and was accepted.

The engagement was, of course, viewed with anything but approbation by her friends at the Château and elsewhere: whenever did a purely romantic alliance find favour in the eyes of the bystanders? the practical advantages of the proposed union are all that they consider! But the love in this case was vigorous enough to survive all discouragement. They were married, and lived happy ever afterwards—or at least were so living when we exiles were quartered at the Cheval Blanc. Mademoiselle Smeete, who once caught sight of Monsieur Martin, maintained that his eyes, besides being handsome, were brimful of honesty and tenderness; and Madame Martin's domestic happiness was written plainly in her beaming little face.

The relations between the pupil and her teacher were singularly happy. Mademoiselle Smeete was enchanted by the liveliness and charm of Madame Martin's manners and conversation; and Madame Martin for years afterwards descanted so warmly on the intelligence and application of Mademoiselle Smeete, that she became a bugbear to all later pupils. They had their differences of opinion nevertheless, in the matter of composition more especially. Mademoiselle Smeete rather aimed at originality of expression, whilst Madame Martin preferred terms consecrated by long and constant use. "The season of bud and blossom and hope," Mademoiselle Smeete would, for instance, write with the grandiloquence natural to her tender age; and Madame Martin, after doubtfully contemplating this fine phrase for some seconds, would mercilessly erase it with one stroke of her pen, and triumphantly substitute "the springtime."

With regard to romantic literature, Madame Martin entertained opinions which Mademoiselle Smeete considered to be inconveniently fastidious. The novels composed especially for *jeunes filles*, provided

by Madame Martin for the entertainment of her pupil, were very far from satisfying the robust appetite of that young Englishwoman. Once, indeed, in consideration of the emancipated position of the British "demoiselle," Madame Martin did, with some hesitation and many apologies to her own conscience, confide to Mademoiselle Smeete a novel which, "for everything in the world she would not have placed in the hands of a French pupil." The expectations aroused in Mademoiselle Smeete's mind by this assurance were not altogether fulfilled. In this, even from Madame Martin's point of view, highly virtuous story, there was but one incident which could alarm the most sensitive delicacy. A husband fell in love with his own wife, and on declaring his passion, went so far as to embrace her. Even Madame Martin did not assert that this was positively improper, but she characterised it disapprovingly as "*un peu trop fort.*"

The conversation lessons which formed part of these studies took place in the Park, where the owner kindly permitted the English visitors to wander at will. Madame Martin herself, in virtue of her still unbroken connection with the Château, had a key of her own.

As she and her English pupil paced the shady walks on brilliant summer mornings, she would discourse fluently on bygone days, especially those passed at the Château itself, calling up before the mind of her listener quaint glimpses of foreign life and customs. The central figure in nearly all these reminiscences was her quondam pupil, Mademoiselle Jeanne d'Harcourt, the Duke's granddaughter, a young lady who ventured, it appeared, to have tastes and opinions of her own, and above all with so eccentric a disinclination for marriage that she persisted in remaining unwed till she was past twenty-four, when, as Madame Martin simply expressed it, her position became *ridicule dans le monde*. To Mademoiselle Smeete it seemed worse than ridiculous, since even at that advanced age Mademoiselle Jeanne was so tied and bound by conventional restrictions as to be unable to go unchaperoned from one end of her grandfather's château to another. Probably Mademoiselle Jeanne herself somewhat chafed at these trammels, for at last she listened to the addresses of a young man, or rather of the friends of a young man, who was amiable and studious and domestic in his tastes. In other respects he was hardly a suitable wooer for her father's child, but things had come to such a pass in the matter of age, that her family had to be thankful for small mercies.

Occasionally we lunched at the Château, a huge barrack-like building in which the whole population of the little town might easily have been lodged. Once upon a time it was none too big, we may suppose, for the establishment of the family which, when we knew it, had dwindled to a man and a maid.

We used to pass through a long succession of salons almost unfurnished, but lined with family portraits of illustrious soldiers and court ladies, till we reached the little drawing-room which the Duchess

had made her own, or the library where she was for ever re-arranging the books.

She was a kindly old lady, with that simplicity of manner which seems in all countries the mark of high-breeding. She wore soft-coloured silks and rich old lace drooped over her snow-white hair and her tiny withered hands. There was no sign in her placid cheerful face of the storms which she had weathered. Her parents were guillotined during the French Revolution, and she herself, an infant of three or four, stood behind them on the scaffold awaiting the same fate, when a *bourreau*, moved by a sudden impulse of pity, snatched her up and tossed her into the heaving crowd below. She was picked up by one of her own class who had escaped the popular fury, and who, when he opened the locket that hung round the child's neck, recognised the portrait of his sister, and perceived that it was his own niece whom fate had thus strangely thrust into his arms. Of her subsequent fate I know nothing, save, of course, that she married the Duke d'Harcourt.

The evening of her days was as peaceful as that which so often follows a stormy morning. As she prayed in the chapel, or sat at meat with her little granddaughter, or walked in the long green alleys of the park, undisturbed and unthreatened, that reign of terror, if she remembered it at all, must have seemed to her no more real than a tale that is told.

The family-party at the Château included at that time only the Duchess and her granddaughter, Marie, a pretty little blonde person who was apt to look thin and blanched when brought into the trying neighbourhood of our blooming "English demoiselle." In the matter of accomplishments, however, she left that little idler far behind. Her musical performances used to transfix the English demoiselle with surprise and admiration. Her eyes grew larger, and her lips parted, not unbecomingly, with awe as she, who could hardly stumble through "Lilla is a lady," listened to Mademoiselle Marie, playing whole sonatas, classical sonatas, with the precision of a machine and about as much feeling.

But how far into the past has time swept all this! The English demoiselle is now the mother of a good sized-family, and it is years since I read in a fashionable chronicle the list of ravishing toilettes prepared for the trousseau of Mademoiselle Marie d'Harcourt.

The railway has reached Harcourt since we left it. Perhaps the Hôtel du Cheval Blanc, like many of those who spent together there so pleasant a summer, exists no longer save in the memory of the survivors.

A TALE OF A WEDDING-CAKE.

I.

"THERE, that's exactly the kind of wedding-cake I should like to have when I am married! Look at it, Gladys; look, Olive; look, Molly! Aren't those sprays of flowers quite too lovely? Oh! I shall certainly have one just like that—only a good bit larger—if I can only remember it, and describe it to Gunters!"

The speaker was the eldest of a charming quartette of girls, shorter than her sisters, but instinct with a certain sense of superiority over them, as having completed her twenty-first year, and thus attained to full young ladyhood. Opinions differed as to which was the prettiest of them—plump, brown-eyed Bee; Gladys, with her dazzling fair skin and golden hair; Olive, with her dark beauty; or fifteen-year-old Molly, whose curly locks still dispersed themselves, mantlewise, over her slender shoulders. But all Axeford knew that the Mervyns were far and away the prettiest girls in the town; and the girls themselves had a certain little air of knowing it too—how should they help it, with so many friends and admirers ready to inform them of the fact?

"I like to think of our weddings—what fun they'll be!" said Molly, still gazing at the cake. "Of course yours will be the first in the family, Bee; and then we shall all be your bridesmaids, and we'll wear pale blue, with the loveliest blush roses, don't you think?"

"Oh, dear me—dear me! so this is what your silly little heads are running on! I always was afraid of it, and now you stand convicted out of your own mouths! To you life is nothing but fun and flirting, marrying and giving in marriage—now, isn't it so?"

"And to you life is all strawberries and cream—now, isn't it so?" says impudent Molly, linking her arm in that of their assailant: a stout, merry-faced lady of something over fifty, who has the air of finding the world a very excellent place to live in.

"You saucy child! But come along; come back to tea with me; and I'll tell you something that will amuse you—something that that wedding-cake has put into my mind. I want you to taste some scones I made to-day; you girls, with your grand house, and your array of servants, don't know anything of the pleasures of cooking little dishes for oneself. Yes, and I'll give you strawberries and cream too—all except Molly—as much as ever you can eat; that's the way to enjoy strawberries, I say. You can stay for the evening, can't you? No admirers coming to-night, are there? Nor any Grammar-School boys, eh, Molly?"

"No, no; *don't*, Miss Summers!" said Molly, turning a little red,

and feeling nervously at her pocket for a packet of almond rock, which a devoted admirer among those very Grammar-School boys presented her with only to-day ; while Bee and Gladys looked considerably at each other.

"Saturday—Saturday—it's Monday Tommy Atkins comes with his flute, isn't it? Yes. Oh, there's only Mr. Burwood and Mr. Wilkes coming to-night—papa's friends, you know—and they won't come till nine or ten, because papa dines in London to-day. So we'll give up dining, and have tea with you instead—that'll be jolly!"

These evenings spent with Miss Summers were of no infrequent occurrence, and it was not her fault that they were not more common still. She did what in her lay to "mother" these girls, scolding and laughing at them for their little follies, but loving them dearly, as they knew full well. She often felt anxious for them, for their mother was dead ; and their father, a wealthy man, seemed to have but one idea as to their up-bringing—viz., that young things should have as good a time as possible. Bee was a little queen in her own household, and in society too ; and her sisters were princesses of the blood. Rich, prosperous, and charming, they were bowed down to by everybody ; boyish admirers haunted the house, and craved the royal bounty ; and even "papa's friends" rendered homage to the powers that were, executing delicate little commissions in town, mending fans, holding wool, and making themselves generally useful, but yet reserving to themselves the right to advise, call to order, and sometimes even to scold, the young tyrants. "Her Majesty's Minister" Mr. Ellery Burwood called himself, and Bee did not hesitate to summon her minister whenever occasion required. Miss Summers was in fact the only person whose friendship with the girls was unmixed with flattery. She was genuinely anxious that they should grow up good and useful women, and insisted that, while they were with her, they should paint, work for the poor, and talk upon rational subjects. "For," as she said, "you *have* brains of your own, children, though you do your best to conceal the fact."

On this particular evening tea was just over, and the scones and strawberries had been done full justice to, before any one remembered Miss Summers' promise of an amusing story.

"Oh, yes! Well," she said in answer to Gladys' reminder, "I thought you'd be amused to hear about my wedding-cake. I never told you about it, did I?"

"Your wedding-cake? Why, you never had one, had you?" questioned Molly, with wide-open eyes.

"To be sure I had. I've no notion of letting married people get all the good things—cake, and presents, and all that, while we unmarried people get none. I didn't mean to stand it, I can tell you! So when I got to an age when one gives up thinking of such things, and settles down to a steady old spinster's life, I thought it was about time that I should give out to my friends that I meant to have a

wedding-day, all by myself—the 24th of June I decided upon, I remember—for it is a good many years ago now. I went out and bought myself a wedding-cake—an excellent one it was; and I had a few friends in to help me eat it, and my dear father and mother and I finished it up at home. A lot of presents came in too—delightful ones, some of them; and all I can say is, that I believe few people have had such a happy wedding-day as I had! There, that's my story. Now let's turn to our work. I want to get ready an outfit for a poor girl going to service, and you must help me."

The girls laughed heartily at the story, and several times laughed again as they sat at their sewing, casting rather puzzled glances at their hostess, who looked the very picture of comfort and well-being; her substantial figure (which had long ago given up all pretence at a waist) ensconced in a large arm-chair, and her bright, happy face bent over her work. At last, when they were putting on their hats to go home, Bee stole up to her and asked timidly: "But don't you feel it rather—rather *flat*, not to be married? I should have thought you must have wanted to be. And yet you can't have, for I know a person like you could have been married plenty of times, if you had liked."

She spoke in an undertone, that the others might not hear, but Miss Summers' answer was audible to all of them.

"Might have been married if I had liked? Yes, certainly, child; I might. But the right man didn't come along; perhaps there never was a right man for me. Those things will come if they are to come; and oh, dear children, if you could only learn to think less about them, and about yourselves altogether! Think of others; try to make *them* happy. That's the best way to be really happy yourselves, depend upon it. Now, good night, my chicks!"

Bee stood for a minute or two looking out of the window, as if suddenly absorbed in a new thought; then she kissed Miss Summers hurriedly, and darted out into the street.

"Come, come, girls!" she exclaimed excitedly. "Let me walk in the middle, I want to tell you something. Miss Summers says we ought to think about making other people happy; and we'll do it—we'll do it!"

"Do it? Do what? How shall we do it?" asked the others eagerly.

"Why, do it for Aunt Julia and Auntie Het—give them a wedding-day! They'll never marry now, poor things; one's thirty-six and the other thirty-five, you know, and they must have given up all thoughts of it. Now's our time! We'll give them a lovely wedding-day; we'll buy them presents; we'll get them that very wedding-cake—oh, lovely! Let's go and buy it now!"

The others were all agog with excitement in a minute, and for a time there was a very Babel of voices. "I only wish we could have provided husbands for the occasion," sighed Gladys, when the first excitement had a little bit toned down. "But of course that's impossible."

"*Gladys!* Of course it is!" said fifteen-year-old Molly, almost indignantly. "Just look at their *age!*"

"I don't know. I have heard of a woman of thirty-five marrying."

"Once in a blue moon. Oh yes, I don't suppose there's anything in the world that never happened," was Bee's wise, if not very lucid, remark.

"Besides, I was looking at a book of Hamerton's the other day," said Olive, "and I particularly noticed his saying that French peasant women were hags at five-and-thirty, the very most attractive age (so he said) in English women."

"When they're married, of course he meant," said Bee decidedly. "Do you know, I've often thought about them—our aunts, I mean—and felt sorry for them," she went on gravely. "Of course they have horridly dull lives now, poor things; and I'm afraid, from what father says, they never had a good time when they were girls, either. Grandfather was poor, or morose, or stingy, or something, and I don't believe they ever saw anybody, so how could they get married? And I'm afraid they'd have liked to be; they don't look very happy as they are, do they? However, they must have given up really thinking of it for years; and this sort of wedding-day will be heaps better than none at all, won't it? We'll begin making out a list of presents at once; mine to Auntie Het shall be a specially nice one, because she was so good to me that time I was ill; when she came and stayed in the house, you know."

"And their wedding-day might be the 24th of June—the same day as Miss Summers'!" cried Molly. "We'll tell dad to dine at his club, because there oughtn't to be any *hes* there, ought there? Let the wedding be at six, and we'll say we are not at home that evening; it'll do Tommy Atkins and Stanley good to spend an evening at home once in a way; and then, after the wedding, we'll have a grand dinner, and wedding-cake—the wedding-cake—for dessert!"

II.

THE wedding was fixed for the 24th, as Molly had suggested; and as there was barely a week to make preparations in, the girls set themselves busily to work. But first of all they started off—the whole four of them—to make sure of the brides.

"They hardly ever have any engagements, true," said Bee. "Still, just fancy how awful it would be if, when all the preparations were made, we found they couldn't come!"

The unconscious brides lived in a pretty little cottage in a quiet, old-fashioned part of the town, with a shady garden which ran down to the river. They led a quiet, useful, uneventful life, working in the parish, attending the daily services at the old parish church which lay just across the river, and going into society but little. A greater

contrast to the gay, careless life led by their nieces could hardly be imagined; but they always liked to see that merry quartette of girls, and made them as welcome as they knew how, Miss Hester Mervyn especially.

"I never saw such children as you are; for ever inventing some new plan, and going wild over it," she said laughingly, when her four nieces pounced down upon her on this particular occasion, and, all talking together, at last made her and their Aunt Julia understand that their presence was requested at some high festival, the nature of which was to be kept a profound secret. "What can this mysterious festival be, I wonder? Oh yes, dear, we'll come of course, Aunt Julia and I. But is it an outdoor or indoor affair? What are we to wear, I mean, full evening dress or not?"

Bee and Gladys looked at each other, and Molly afterwards declared that she could see the words "travelling dress" hovering on their lips. Anyhow, Bee said after an instant's pause, "Oh, not evening dress, please; just come in nice high dresses—those dove-coloured ones that you wore on Sunday will be just the thing, won't they, Gladys?"

"And then we'll be all dressed alike—in white, I suppose—for Molly hasn't any dress to match our others," she went on, as they almost danced home. "We shall have to act bridesmaids, you know; and we'll all have bouquets alike—forget-me-nots, I think—no, roses; and the brides shall have those exquisite carnations."

The girls had generally pocket-money enough and to spare, but on this occasion they begged their father for an extra ten-pound note, for there was the wedding-cake to buy, and they were determined that the presents should be really good ones. Gladys and Olive shut themselves up for two days together, for the painting of a handsome screen which they bought in the town; Bee scoured the shops for flower-vases, hand-bags, and various other articles which they had determined to buy; and finally Mr. Burwood was summoned, and commissioned to go to the stores the next day and choose the loveliest little five-o'clock tea-table he could find, also a lady's purse, which must have the initial H engraved upon it.

"And mind it's a very nice one, for it's for me to give," said Molly. "Oh, Bee—oh, Gladys, let's tell him about it; I'm sure he's dying to know!"

"Who wouldn't be, when this tremendous secret is making you all look as if you had the affairs of the nation on your shoulders?" laughed Mr. Burwood, who seemed remarkably complaisant for a busy Q.C. as he was. But Bee spoke at the same moment:

"Molly! I would not dream of telling—a man!" she said, sinking her voice at the last two words; and Molly dropped her eyes, abashed.

"I bow to the Queen Bee. I wouldn't hear the secret for worlds," said Mr. Burwood.

And so the secret was never divulged to any one—not even to Miss

Summers, who, as it happened, was called away to nurse a cousin the very morning after the girls had been to tea with her; and the ordering of the day had to be left to the girls' own unaided wisdom. They felt fully equal to it, however; and when six o'clock came at last, everything was ready.

In the drawing-room the shutters had been shut, and the gas and candles lighted—a perfect blaze of illumination; for, as Bee remarked, it looked more of a festival so. The fire-place was a mass of flowers and ferns artistically arranged by Gladys; the various presents were spread out on two tables, placed on each side—one for Aunt Julia, the other for Auntie Het; and in front of the fire-place, against a background of flowers and ferns, stood the wedding-cake, hidden just now by the screen, which had been finished just in time, by dint of heroic exertions. At the piano sat Olive, her fingers itching to begin the “Wedding March,” which she had been practising up for the occasion; Bee and Gladys were flitting about the room, putting little finishing touches to the arrangement of the flowers and the presents; and Molly, all agog with excitement, pranced up and down the hall, now and then peeping in to admonish the cat and dog, whom she had fantastically decked out with flowers, and who were now sitting solemnly on stools by the two tables, as guardians of the presents. “We shall answer the door ourselves, Thomas,” she had said; for true to Bee’s perception of the fitness of things, no man was to be allowed any share whatever in the proceedings.

Very pretty Molly looked, in her white dress, with a bouquet of pink roses in her hand, and her mantle of golden hair on her shoulders; and so her aunts thought, as, the bell sounding at last, she opened the door to them and bowed them in. Hats and cloaks were soon disposed of, Mr. Mervyn’s study having been temporarily fitted up as a dressing-room; and then, having presented each with a lovely bouquet of carnations, Molly ushered them into the brightly-lighted drawing-room, just as Olive was thundering out the first bars of the “Wedding March.”

The “brides” looked very well, too, in their pretty dove-coloured dresses; Bee’s quick eyes noted that at once, as she led them, with smiles, but no words, to the sofa. “Auntie Het” was pale and quiet-looking, and her dress was quiet to match; but Aunt Julia, who was taller, and had more presence than her sister, wore her dove-colour “with a difference,” having little scarlet bows here and there, which seemed to set off the colour in her cheeks. “Aunt Julia looks quite handsome, but I love Auntie Het the best. I am glad I got her the nicest presents,” said Bee to herself.

The brilliant light was quite dazzling to eyes fresh from the tender gloom of a grey summer evening; and both ladies looked thoroughly mystified, but amused and expectant at the same time. Nothing could have pleased the girls better; they wanted the whole meaning of the thing to dawn upon the brides gradually.

As soon as Olive's spirited performance of the "Wedding March" had come to an end, Gladys mounted a small rostrum (the programme for the evening had been carefully arranged beforehand) ; Bee drew back the screen, disclosing the wedding-cake ; and Molly seated herself midway between the cat and dog, on a foot-stool which had been placed behind the screen in readiness for her ; while Olive remained at the piano, having orders to play soft and appropriate music, as an accompaniment to the speeches to be delivered.

It was not for nothing that Tommy Atkins, Gladys' devoted admirer, had been articled to a solicitor in the town.

"Whereas," she began, with recollections of certain "musty old papers" which she had seen him copying—"Whereas, it hath been pointed out to us that in the lives of certain persons—to wit, unmarried persons—there is often a grievous hardship, viz., that they, unlike their married brethren—sistren, I mean—no, sisters—are debarred from the pleasures, and festivities, and the—the free-will offerings, which are the usual concomitants of the—the drawing together of the bonds of matrimony, it hath seemed good to us to—to—" The effort had been almost too much for her ; she hesitated, gasped, and looked helplessly at her sister.

"I'll go on, shall I ?" said the self-possessed Bee, jumping up, and giving her a hand to descend. "It was almost my turn, you know ; and you've done it awfully well. Now for my part," and with a beaming face she ascended the rostrum. "I can't speak grandly, but this is just how it is," she began. "You see, Aunt Hester and Aunt Julia, Miss Summers was saying to us the other day that she thought it was very hard that unmarried people shouldn't have presents, and a cake, and all that, you know ; and that when the time came when she knew she shouldn't be married, she made a wedding-day for herself, and had—oh, such a jolly time ! So we thought we'd have one for you ; and here is your wedding-cake, and here are your presents—this tableful for you, Aunt Het, and that for Aunt Julia ; and we've done everything we can think of to make it nice, and we do hope——"

She suddenly stopped, and the dimpled arm, which had been outstretched, fell helplessly to her side. Aunt Julia had sprung up, and was standing close under the rostrum, red with passion, her cheeks now indeed rivalling the hues of the bows on her dress. "Come down !" she said, laying an imperious hand on Bee's dress. "Come down at once, you rude, impertinent little thing !" And Bee came down, her eyes round with dismay, and her pink cheeks rapidly paling.

It was as though a sudden and appalling thunder-clap had resounded through the room. None of the girls had had the least warning of it, for Bee and Gladys had been engrossed in their own and each other's oratory ; Olive had been at the piano ; and Molly—poor Molly—was engaged in superhuman efforts to prevent the dog and cat from descending from their pedestals, and making a rush at

each other. So they now stood dazed and mute, as Aunt Julia, almost choking with passion, poured out the torrent of her indignation.

"You are rude, insolent children, all of you! That you should *dare* to insult us so!—it is almost beyond belief—it is quite beyond forgiveness!—yes, Hester, it is, and you know it," for her sister, pale and trembling, had laid a hand on her arm. "Let me speak, pray. These insolent little chits shall not give themselves airs with me, whatever they may do with their friends! I speak as I think; and of all the impudent, ill-bred people that my experience of the world, and my—my age have brought me into contact with, William's children are out and out the worst! Come away, Hester—come away!"

She was close to the door by this time, and marched out, while the girls, with pale, scared faces, stood looking stupidly after her. But the sound of the street door, as she slammed it behind her, roused them, and with one accord they turned to look at their other aunt. "Are you angry, too, Auntie Het?" faltered Bee. "Oh! have we hurt you—have we hurt you?" And when there was no response, save that her eyes filled with tears, they all gave way together, throwing themselves down on chairs and sofas, in the abandonment of their grief.

"I know you meant well, dear children," she said, and would have kissed them; but not a face was lifted, and she could only stroke their bright hair. Then she too went out; and the cat and dog fell to with a will, and fought, and scratched, and bit, unmolested, to the accompaniment of sobs, and deep, heartrending groans.

"Oh! oh!" wailed Molly at last. "When I was a little thing, and had to drink mustard-and-water because I had eaten poisonous berries, I said 'I hated the day, I'd beat the day'; and I wish—I wish I could do it now!"

* * * * *

Nearly an hour later, the drawing-room door opened, and a tall figure appeared on the threshold; and a pair of keen kindly eyes surveyed the scene with ever growing amazement. The blaze of light, the wedding-cake, the flowers, and the presents—some of which the quick eyes recognised at once—everything seemed to denote high festival, but the strange appearance of the young ladies of the house. Bee was rocking herself to and fro, her dimpled elbows on her knees, and her face buried in her hands; Gladys and Olive were huddled together on the sofa, their arms round each other, and their faces hidden on each other's shoulders; and as for Molly, she had cast herself full length upon the rug. Nobody looked up, and Ellery Burwood's ear caught the sound of muffled sobs.

"What on each is the matter?" he demanded, shutting the door, and coming up close to the woe-begone group. "What has happened? For goodness' sake, tell me; don't keep me in suspense!"

There was genuine alarm in his tone; and whether this amused the girls, or whether it was merely that a certain reaction against their

grief was just setting in, certain it is that they looked up at him for a minute with tear-stained faces, and then burst into uncontrollable laughter, which, however, sounded perilously like sobbing.

"Yes, I'll tell you, I'll tell you!" gasped Bee. All her scruples as to letting any *hes* into the secret had vanished now, in the disastrous overthrow of the cherished scheme.

She began bravely enough; but long before Mr. Burwood had any inkling of the real state of the case, the tide of misery swept over her again, and sobbing out "You go on, Gladys; I can't," she buried her face in her hands, and began rocking to and fro once more. So Gladys had to go on; and she, bravely struggling with both laughter and tears, and clinging to Olive's arm for support, managed to give a fairly intelligible account of the whole affair; while Ellery Burwood settled himself to listen, and, if need be, to cross-examine, his hands in his pockets, and his keen humorous eyes (there was not much anxiety in them now) fixed on Gladys' downcast face.

Suddenly, however, there came a change. He started, wheeled round, and finally almost turned his back upon Gladys, making Molly, whose face had still been hidden in the rug, rear her head, and dart a quick glance at him. What she saw made her give a hasty pinch to Bee's foot, and from that minute the two watched him as though fascinated. He was perfectly unconscious of their gaze. A sudden and deep flush had suffused his usually pale face; his lips, which were so firm and even compressed, were trembling; and his eyes—so Molly afterwards declared—were liquid with tears. As Gladys finished her story with, "Oh, we never meant to hurt them; you know we couldn't have meant to hurt them!" he seemed to pull himself together with a great effort, and turned round again, pale as ever, but with a strange gleam in his eyes which struck her at once. What was it? Not anger, for he said quickly, but very kindly, "I know, I know! you would none of you hurt a fly if you knew it. But—good heavens!"—here he flushed again, even more deeply than before, and seemed to struggle with words that would come whether he liked it or no—"the idea of thinking that a woman of five-and-thirty has lost all her attractions!" Then he, too, made for the door, and, like the two "brides," was seen no more that night.

Shock number two. But far from being a knock-down-blow, as was the first, this second shock brought all the girls to their feet in breathless excitement. "Olive!" "Bee!" "Gladys—oh Gladys!" was all they could ejaculate for a minute or two; then the three rushed into each other's arms, and Bee exclaimed, "Which, oh which is it? 'Five-and-thirty,' he said; but how should he know? Does he—can he—Oh, what a wonderful, wonderful day!"

While Molly skipped wildly round the room, and then fell on her knees before the cake. "Dear, dear wedding-cake!" she cried, hugging it in her arms. "You may be wanted after all—I do believe you will be!"

III.

WHEN Miss Hester Mervyn left her nieces' house, she went straight home to the little cottage by the river-side. She did not much expect to find her sister there, thinking it probable that she would "walk her temper off"—a plan which Miss Julia Mervyn not infrequently tried, and which generally had a very good effect. In all likelihood she was trying it now; at any rate, she had not come in; and after taking off her bonnet and cloak, Hester Mervyn came down to the little sitting-room, dropped wearily into a chair, and began to think.

And her thoughts were very sad ones. As her young nieces had divined, she had led a very colourless life. Her parents had been not only poor, but strongly Puritan in their notions, keeping their two daughters very strictly to their needlework and their various household duties, and seeming to have no idea that young things wanted amusements, or companions of their own age. So girlhood came and went, without having ever brought any young lovers, or even friends, to them; and Hester, who had plenty of romantic ideas of her own—as what girl has not?—found nothing for them to feed on. Moreover, she was of a deeply affectionate, self-sacrificing nature; her heart craved for love, and yet more for some one upon whom to pour out the treasures of her own love; she adored little children, and would fain have had some of her very own to tend and care for, as any one must have known who saw the wistful look that would come into her eyes as she watched a mother and child together. If she dreamed—if she still dreamed—of such happiness being yet one day hers, who can blame her? She was not young, she was not beautiful—she knew that well enough—but the heart knoweth its own tenderness as well as its own bitterness, and finds it hard sometimes to realise that that tenderness may never find full scope, full expression.

So it was that this evening's events had been a sudden and most painful shock to her, bringing light to her mind, but darkness into her soul. That she had cherished any dreams, she had hardly known until to-night; now she had been made to see herself as others saw her, and to acknowledge, what she ought (so she told herself) to have acknowledged long ago—that those dreams must be banished for ever. It was a heavy blow, coming as it did without any warning; and sitting down at the little table in the window, she wept quietly but very bitterly, mourning for the hopes that were no more. "They say that every dog has his day," she said to herself at last with a sad little smile. "That is not true. I have never had my day, and I never shall."

There was a quick impatient rap at the door, and the next minute the little maid-servant ushered in a gentleman. Hester rose mechanically to meet him, hardly seeing who it was in the gathering gloom.

Ellery Burwood had hurried away from his amazed young friends with his brain, like his face, on fire. "Oh, the insolence of youth—the insolence of youth!" he muttered to himself as he shut the street door after him; then he thought no more of them, being lost in wonder at his own feelings. He had had no conception, until that night, that Hester Mervyn was anything, or ever would be anything, to him. He had often met her at her brother's house; he had noticed her quiet gentle ways,—the tenderness with which she nursed Bee in her long illness, the sweetness of the rather sad mouth, the wistfulness of the grave, deep-set eyes. "A sweet-natured, gentle-souled woman," he had said to himself once or twice; then she went back to her little cottage home; and what with the rush of business, and the pleasant distractions to be found at his friend's house and elsewhere, he had thought no more of her. Now, however, came to him a sudden revelation both of himself and of her—of her, with her tender, sensitive spirit—of himself, possessed with deep and reverent admiration for her, an admiration that at a word would spring into love—nay, that had sprung into it already.

"Blind fool that I was!" he exclaimed, in bitter wrath with himself. "And she—she is suffering now, and I might perhaps have spared her!"

He had hurried on, only half conscious where his steps were taking him; now he found himself outside the cottage. He paused but a moment, then knocked at the door, as we have seen.

Miss Mervyn was in, and alone, the servant said; and before Hester rose, he had time to see the sad, sweet face, with its traces of recently shed tears. He could not begin quietly. "Miss Mervyn—Hester," he burst out as soon as the door was shut, "I have come to tell you—to ask you—you will let me speak—you will not send me away?"

Then Hester listened to the story she had thought but now that she was never to hear; her sweet, grave eyes dilating, first with keen amazement (for she had never dreamt, sweet modest soul, that any friend of her charming young nieces could ever spare even a glance for her) then with the dawning of a new-found joy. "I think—I think—" she murmured, in answer to his eager questionings. "But oh! you must give me time—time to think; it is all so strange."

"I will, I will, my darling," he said, with tender consideration for her bewilderment; and Hester leaned her face on her hands and tried to think it all over. Suddenly she looked up at him. "Have you been there? Did you hear anything about this evening?" she asked breathlessly.

"I did."

It was Hester's turn to flush now. She rose and went to the window, standing there with bent head, and hands tightly clasped. The river was discoursing sweet murmurous music as it flowed softly past in the twilight; but she heard nothing but the quick surging of the blood as it rose in waves to her brain. "Oh, go away, pray go

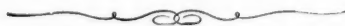
away!" she said at last, in an agony of shame. But, instead of obeying, he came up close to her and took her clasped hands in his.

"Hester—my Hester—do you think it was *pity*? Look at me! Are you so bad a judge of expression as that?"

* * * * *

So the wedding-cake was wanted after all; Ellery Burwood said he would have no other. And Bee was not the first of the family to be married, either; but she and her sisters made a charming quartette of bridesmaids to "Auntie Het," and enjoyed the wedding-day immensely.

"Out of evil comes good," said Bee sententiously, as, the guests all gone, they surveyed the remnants of the cake. "We made dreadful little asses of ourselves that day; I feel quite hot even now when I think of it. Still, who knows but what Auntie Het might never have had a wedding-cake at all if it hadn't been for us?"



"THE HARVEST NOW IS GATHERED IN."

HEY, for the wealth of the harvest weather,
When all shall be faithfully garnered in!
For that we have sown we shall surely gather—
The gold for the goodly, the ruth for sin.

Every season its birthright knoweth—
The seedling planted in vernal spring
Through the summer in silence groweth,
While callow nestlings find voice and sing.

On we go, by the wayside sowing,
Broadcast sowing with open hand;
Ever behind us, springing and growing,
"A cloud of witnesses" hide the land.

Aye, but heed we the seed in planting?
Sow we in patience, and till the ground?
Ask we, when grown will the seed be wanting
In fulness and soundness, or worthy found?

Swift in our hearts is the harvest springing,
Side by side grow the wheat and tares,
And ever there cometh an autumn, bringing
Tears and laughter, and joys and cares.

Sow, O, friend, as the years speed o'er you,
Sow good seed with an open hand;
Sow; the promise lies clear before you;
You'll reap the fruit in God's Harvest Land!

HELEN MARION BURNSIDE.

SOCIABILITY OF SQUIRRELS.

MY first acquaintance with this agreeable quality in the agile, graceful creatures, darting from bough to bough in our English woods, was made when I was staying at a beautiful country house in Devonshire. I used often to sit very quietly sketching under the fine old trees, and the squirrels would come to the end of an overhanging bough, and watch my proceedings with apparent interest.

As I do not understand their dialect, I cannot say what might be their opinion of my performances, but they chatted very merrily, seeming glad to welcome an intruder on their solitude.

For many years our own home was in the middle of a pine-wood, and there a much more intimate friendship was formed with the squirrels. Our gardener found a young one caught in a net in the strawberry bed, and brought it to me. It was kept for some time in a squirrel-cage, where it seemed tolerably contented; but we were not happy about our small captive. Accidentally, or purposely, the door was left open, and we were glad when it regained its liberty.

A day or two afterwards, a young lady who was staying in the house told us that our squirrel had run up to her in the gravel walk; and next morning Charlie made his appearance at the dining-room window. His visits were repeated for several days. No attempt was made to capture him. He ran about the room as if in search of something; and at last jumped on a canary's cage which hung in the window.

"I believe he is looking for his own old home," I said. And immediately upon my fetching it from the loft where it had been put away, Charlie ran in, and gave himself a swing on the roller, and ate the nuts we placed in the tray.

It is to be supposed that Charlie told his friends that we were lovers of animals, and might be trusted; for other squirrels frequently visited us, in the house and in the grounds. Those were the happy days—for quiet country ladies—of croquet-playing; and we had a levelled ground in a part of the fir-wood, near the garden, where we often spent the summer afternoons. There the squirrels were quite at home, and would run up our mallets, and sit upon our shoulders, or even on the crowns of our hats.

Some of our visitors they made acquaintance with immediately, others they always avoided. A little toy-terrier, with a bell attached to its collar, which the cunning little creature used to try to silence, that it might steal upon our favourites unheard, was their peculiar aversion; but our own pet Skye, St. Barbe, would let them climb over his back, and frolic about him without stirring an inch.

Mrs. Brightwen in her admirable volume, 'Wild Nature tamed by

Kindness,' is quite right in affirming that quietness is the great conciliator of animals. An abrupt gesture will at once startle and drive them away; but if you sit still they will gain confidence, and come nearer and nearer, till they learn to feed out of your hand, to nestle in the folds of your dress, and even to search in your pockets for nuts and crusts of bread which they know you often carry about with you.

One of my sisters, who was particularly gentle in voice and manner, and very fond of animals, exercised a peculiar charm over the squirrels. She often got up at five o'clock to feed them, when they pattered across the verandah to her window; and she always kept a store of food for them. A china jar of nuts stood on the mantel-piece, and she more than once remarked on its becoming mysteriously empty. At last it was discovered that the squirrels came into the room, lifted off the lid, and helped themselves without breaking the fragile ornament.

We kept a good many fowls—bantams and half-bantams—which had a fancy for roosting in the fir-trees, and one of the hens would persist in laying her eggs in a squirrel's nest. This was carrying sociability too far, and the squirrel got into a rage and danced round it until the eggs were removed.

It often amused us to see the hens teaching the little chickens to climb the trees, and gathering them under their wings on quite a slender bough. We used to put sticks and twigs to aid the youngsters in their ascent.

The window where the squirrel's cage stood was also a favourite resort of our hens, who always brought their young broods there, and often came to be fed. They did not approve of the squirrels, and would gather in a circle round one of them, on the lawn, attracting us to the windows by their furious and noisy cackling.

Charlie would remain quite still till the circle had gradually drawn closer; then, with a sudden spring, would jump high over their heads, and in another moment be chattering at them from the boughs of a magnificent ilex tree, in which he and his friends greatly delighted.

That wide verandah supported by rough, unpainted pine trunks finally cost us the loss of our company of squirrels. The poles grew rotten, and had to be replaced. It was a very noisy, tedious operation, nearly overcoming our own patience, and quite tiring out that of our wild little pets. Perhaps the workmen teased or frightened them. They never afterwards renewed their visits.

Quite a growth of nut bushes threatened to grow up on the lawn, where they buried their spoil. They always secreted a few when fed, and carried them away. I suppose they forgot where they were hidden, for in all parts of the grounds tiny trees sprang up, where, certainly, they had never been planted by human hands.

The gamekeepers from a neighbouring estate came purposely to see our squirrels, and went away satisfied with the truth of their master's report of the tameness to which they had been brought by the exercise

of sympathy, discretion, and the total absence of restraint and coercion.

We used to amuse ourselves picking up cones and sticks in the fir-wood, and the squirrels would come and chatter and laugh in the tree-tops, flinging down in sport, or to help us, large fir-cones, which in spring and autumn we loved to see sparkle on our hearths, emitting a sweet, wholesome fragrance.

Probably those sharp teeth did not improve the trees by robbing them of their young shoots; but, after all, the pine woods were so plentiful, and the trees were often twisted and scathed, and not worth the trouble of being carted away, when felled by south-westerly gales, so we never grudged the squirrels their merry play.

The son of St. Barbe, the dog who was so friendly with our squirrels, could not bear them, and used to try to climb trees in pursuit of them. Rough was also naturally averse to cats, but formed such a friendship with one of ours and her progeny that, unless the kittens were sent too far away, he would fetch them back.

Once our maids could not get the dog to move from the root of a fir-tree, half way between Heathside and Parkstone, until he had coaxed down one of these kittens, which had been given away, and was lying hidden among the branches, where it had taken refuge after trying to find its way to its birthplace.

Rough persisted in his solicitations until they were crowned with complete success. Then, after kissing each other, the affectionate couple walked home side by side contentedly. The mother cat was often seen "kissing with patient love the stone that marks his burial-ground;" and mournfully prowling round the spot just above the croquet lawn, where our first favourite, the Heathside dog, was laid.

Nature vindicates herself, and Providence rebukes man's feeble judgment. If you feed the wild birds well, they will not be such pilferers of your seeds and fruits, and they will clear your shrubs and trees of their deadlier insect foes. The always harmonious sounds which haunt our hills and groves will give us sweeter melody than hired musicians. But the miscalled "Dumb Animals" can speak for themselves.

"List to our hundred voices heard by mount, and stream, and rill,
The thousand mingled tones that rise above the distant hill.
* * *

We ask no subtle orators to plead in our great cause,
We take it from your judgment halls, we bow not to your laws;
High in the heavens our voice is heard, there judgment shall be given,
The Lord of man and beast presides in the great court of heaven!
* * *

That great immortal Father Who sees the sparrow fall,
In Whose kind ear our separate tones form one harmonious call,
Who knows the wants and feels the woes of every living thing,
From the spider on the dungeon-wall to the forests' mighty king."

ROSA MACKENZIE KETTLE.

A BALCONY AT LUCERNE.

BY W. W. FENN.

THOSE who remember Lucerne five-and-twenty years ago will know it to have been one of the most romantic and picturesque of Swiss towns. However modernized it may have become, the mighty mountains surrounding it, near or remote, are indestructible; and to some extent the same may be said of the many towers, ancient buildings, and walls marking its antiquity. The venerable covered wooden bridge, too, was a conspicuous feature at the time of which I speak, and before the grand new one threw it into the shade, it used to offer to me a delightful loitering place of an evening. I spent many an hour there, especially when, to the artist's eye, the effects of moonlight lent it an additional charm.

I was staying in rooms not far off in one of the houses overhanging the rushing river Reuss, where it first narrows into its channel after leaving the broad and lovely lake. There was quite a Venetian aspect about this bit of the town, and the numerous balconies, one above another, with which many of the houses were adorned, increased the similarity. My room opened out on to one of these, high up, and from it I could look down upon those, wider and broader, belonging to the rooms beneath me.

The season was midsummer, the tourists had not arrived in force, the weather was fine, and all was favourable to the artistic mission which led me to the place. When the day's work was over, either the bridge or my own balcony offered delightfully suggestive retreats well suited to the meditative, fanciful reveries into which a painter's mind loves to relapse. Nothing was lacking but the occasional companionship of some sympathetic soul—woman's or man's. The former preferable, perhaps, but not necessarily, for I was never very susceptible, as the phrase goes, and unless she should chance to be thoroughly after the ideal of my own heart—or brain, more properly speaking—I felt fairly contented with my solitude.

Such a "dream-being," however, was not likely to cross my path; and yet I had beheld some one flitting hither and thither at times, whose outward aspect might have warranted the hope of her possessing sympathies and tastes akin to my own. I do not pretend to draw a word-picture of her; let it suffice that if mere appearance had been all in all, she would have more than satisfied my aspirations.

I was making several drawings under and about the bridge, and as the shades of evening fell, I had frequently seen her taking her way across the old wooden pile, as if returning from some regular occupation. She was no mere workwoman, however; and, though a foreigner,

evidently not a Swiss, I could have been sworn. Not perhaps either quite a lady, taking the word as vulgarly interpreted. Speculation ran high about her; but it was more than a fortnight after the first glimpse ere I discovered that she actually lived in the rooms immediately under mine.

One warm night, when the moon was streaming over the Venetian canal-like avenue made by the houses on either bank of the river, I was sitting smoking a cigar in my balcony, when voices coming from that immediately underneath attracted my attention—a man's and a woman's speaking in Italian. Looking down, I saw their figures, and after a moment her face—the face I knew so well, and had admired so much. It was the first really hot evening we had had, and she wore nothing over her head but a lace mantilla. Only very indistinctly could I catch the purport of their talk, for the monotonous roar of the Reuss drowned most sounds not loud—and their voices were far from that.

I did not wish to listen either, though I could not help watching. Nor, indeed, after a minute, could I help getting unmistakable evidence that he was urging an unwelcome suit upon her. His action, too, was unmistakable. More than once he tried to take her hand; and when, after much resistance on her part, he at last held it for a moment, he bent his lips towards it; ere they could touch it, however, she snatched it away, to his evident annoyance. In fact, throughout he seemed greatly angered by her rejection of his overtures, and this last act of hers brought his rage to a climax. I plainly heard him mutter an oath, and then, as he retreated from the balcony into the room I heard him in louder tones swear to be revenged.

She remained outside after he had disappeared, and a moment or two later the resounding clang of a closing door, coming up the common stairway of the house, told me he had left her apartments.

Should I know him again?

Yes, I thought so. His tall, lithe, agile figure had a character in it very distinguishable from the stoutish, thick-set, male population of the Swiss town.

When he was gone, she lingered motionless, exactly where he left her, and in the same attitude, her cheek resting on the hand of the arm which leaned on the top rail of the iron balcony. The moon fell with a clear, soft gleam upon her face; and though that was not strictly beautiful as to the features, it had a nameless charm for me—greater than ever now.

Would you expect a solitary bachelor to have done anything else than look and long? To disturb her by so much as the faintest noise even would have been sacrilege. I waited and watched. Like a statue she stood for, I should guess, nearly an hour, her full weight, as it seemed, resting upon that bar of iron. Then, on a sudden, this delightful vision vanished, the window was closed with a snap, and I was left with more than my usual pabulum for reflection.

* * * *

Was it four nights or four hours later that this scene was reproduced?

That I shall never know; but it was reproduced, I will swear, all—to the smallest detail—as I have described it, and with the full consciousness on my part, whilst gazing, that it had all happened before, and that this was the second time I had witnessed the strange interview. For this reason I use the word “reproduced” advisedly. There I was in the balcony, and there were the man and woman in the lower one again. You may hint that I am a dreamer, that this was the result of the imaginative side of the artistic faculties, and that it was absurd to suppose the same identical circumstance, in all respects, would occur as it had done before. I can only insist it was not the first time I had seen it.

Well, anyway, there I sat, on this second occasion, long after the lady had retired into her room, long after the whole town was hushed in the quiet of sleep, and long after the moon had dipped below the opposite houses, throwing the whole course of the river into the deepest gloom. Below, no sound or sign of movement, save the rush of the Reuss; above, pale, trembling stars, here and there, ever and anon obscured by fleecy yet accumulating clouds; but for the water, absolute silence everywhere, and not a light visible in any window.

Far into the night my meditations carried me. The early summer dawn perhaps might have been evident, but for the change coming over the sky. Then, at last, a faint noise right underneath where I sat, as of some one moving very irregularly, clambering as it were, upon a quite low-down balcony. Yes, clambering up the iron-work certainly—that was it!—and getting every moment a little nearer, a little higher up—very faint now and then, but louder at each recurrence.

I bent down to look, but seeing was out of the question in that thick darkness. Ears, however, are frequently more useful than eyes. They were so in this case, for by accurate and intense listening, I discovered what was going on.

A footstep had reached and planted itself in the lady's balcony directly beneath mine. Soon there arose plainly to my acute sense of hearing, a little grating noise, with a pause in it once or twice at first, but afterwards for a considerable time. It was a little sawing noise, the grating of a file upon the iron-work! Remember, I could see nothing, and could only catch these sounds very indistinctly amidst the din and hum of the waters. But their meaning to me was not indistinct; that flashed into my mind very soon; I strung it all together in a moment. Some one was filing away the upper bar on which that unknown being had rested her fair arm and hand, and that “some one,” beyond a doubt, was the vengeful rejected suitor.

To swing myself over my balcony and to descend to hers by one of the upright supports which connected them, and then and there confront the villain at his diabolical work, was an irresistible impulse.

But I was powerless to move ; the hand stretched out in front of me, as I lay with my ear close down to the open-work at the edge of the balustrade, had become entangled in the decorative fretwork, and I could not withdraw my wrist. A sharp-pointed, spike-like ornament pierced the flesh as I strove to rise. An agony of mind and body overcoming me, with a wrench and an irresistible groan of pain I, at last, freed my arm to find myself—in bed !

* * * * *

Had it all been a dream then—the whole affair, my first experience no less than the second ? No, I could not, would not credit an hypothesis so humiliating, so absurd !

Springing out of bed, and going to the window, plainly discernible now through the obscurity of the room by reason of the summer dawn, I stepped on to the balcony, to find everything as quiet as the grave. The Swiss are an early people, but they scarcely begin to stir so soon as three in the morning, and that hour rang out from a neighbouring church clock whilst I gazed. A matter-of-fact man would have shrugged his shoulders, apostrophised himself as an ass, and gone back to bed with the conviction that his supper had disagreed with him. The apostrophe might have been deserved in this case, but the conviction which rose in my mind was of a different character. I was convinced, as thoroughly as I ever was of anything in my life, that the scene I had witnessed was a reality and no dream ; that the filing sound I had heard was no distempered nervous grating in the brain, and that the wrench and struggle by which I freed my imprisoned hand was no distorted mental effort born of mysterious nightmare. In proof whereof, behold my wrist, scored, wounded, and bleeding still !

I partially dressed myself. My limbs at least were free, and there was nothing to prevent me from descending to that lower balcony as I had proposed in my dream—

What am I saying ? You will laugh, and think I have committed myself. Not at all. Two minutes more saw me carrying out my purpose. It offered little mechanical difficulty. The whole fabric of the light ornamental iron-work composing the balconies from the highest to the lowest was connected by upright supports running from one to the other. Agile, active, and strong as I was in those days, I soon contrived, without danger, to slide down one of the thin iron columns, to find myself on *her* balcony, in front of her window.

Before turning to the object which had really led me to take this step, I could not help peeping in through the closed, but only partially-curtained, French casement. A faint light was burning, sufficient dimly to reveal the interior, and to show me the occupant asleep upon her couch. A flickering ray fell upon her fair cheek, and the loosened tresses of her luxuriant bronze-toned hair straying upon her pillow. One hand and arm, freed from clothing, lay extended over the coverlet, supine, motionless, and pure as alabaster. I could have gazed at the

fair picture in rapt delight for many a minute, had I not been recalled by such sense of honour as I possessed to the recollection of the purpose I had in view. But for this purpose there could have been no warrant for the intrusion I was making on her privacy.

To turn my back upon the window cost me an effort ; but resolution is said to be a valuable and commendable quality in man, if not in woman ; and I think and hope I am gifted with a fair share of it. By its aid I bent my attention to an examination of the top rail of the balustrade. In the centre one long bar extended between the two upright pillars, down one of which I had descended. Against the corroded rusty end impinging on this it was that she had leant for such a length of time—the night before ?—well, Heaven knows ! Whenever it was it seemed that it could not have been long since ; I do not know. But this I know, that as I peered down on the end of that iron bar, I discovered by the fast increasing daylight that it had been filed almost through !—filed I must call it, but the separation in a similar bar of wood would have looked as if it had been sawn—to within the eighth of an inch of separation.

Below this rail there was a space of more than a foot ere any firm protection to the balcony existed. The result to any one resting their weight inadvertently on the upper bar therefore became instantly obvious. It would have snapped like matchwood, and no earthly power could have saved one from being precipitated headlong from this fearful height into the tearing river !

This was the scoundrel's trap, set with diabolical cunning ; and there, hard by, lay his intended victim, sleeping calmly, and little recking of the peril in which the villain had placed her ; dreaming, perchance, some delightful dream, as her half-parted, half-smiling lips suggested. Yes ; but surely you will not tell me that I too had been dreaming ?

Before swarming up to my own domain again,* two things had to be done—first, to examine the other and farther end of the iron bar ; secondly, to warn the unconscious sleeper of her danger, or, at least, make it apparent by some means. Both terminations had been treated alike, as I expected to find, except that the cut in the other was not quite so deep ; otherwise it might have yielded to the pressure of her resting, trustful arms too soon. This fact, however, defeated its own object, for it yielded to my by no means trustful arms and hands ; and, with but a slight wrench, I broke it off, and removed it entirely, leaving the front of the balcony quite unprotected.

It had not taken me long to decide on this course of action, for although I am a meditative, slow, easy-going fellow by nature, I have, when called upon by emergency to act, a knack of doing so promptly. With the treacherous bar removed entirely, the danger was removed also, for no one could approach the window without seeing the gap, much less step on to the balcony.

So then, placing the piece of iron conspicuously and half-upright

against some of the fretwork, and taking one momentary and final peep at the sleeping beauty, I scaled the column again and was soon back on my own floor. But it was broad daylight by this time, and the question arose—had I been observed?

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Broad daylight? Yes, but a dull, grey, leaden daylight, without a tinge of the "russet-mantled morn" anywhere visible. A chill and fitful wind swept down from the direction of the lake, and one or two pattering drops of heavy rain were falling now and again. Storm-forging Pilatus had set his bellows to work, and the blows on his anvil were beginning to resound in distant peals of muttering thunder. The oppressive heat of the preceding evening presaged this, but the actual brewing of the tempest took place with magical quickness. Sometimes the grim mountain monster has a knack of turning out such specimens of his weird skill with amazing rapidity; and ere I had been five minutes in my room, he had completed his handiwork. Violent floods of rain descended; the sudden hurricane set lattice and *jalousie* creaking and banging; incessant flashes of vivid lightning flushed the atmosphere, now again almost as dark as night; and the "dread, rattling thunder" seemed to shake the very foundations of the earth. In a moment one terrific crash just overhead appeared to strike the house, and caused me involuntarily to close and retreat from the window.

As I looked out again after a minute, I saw that, indeed, a bolt must have fallen and struck some of the ironwork of these balconies. One of the columns rising to the topmost floor was twisted, seared, melted almost at its base where it passed out of sight. The rain, however, continuing to pour incessantly, I could not satisfy my curiosity by stepping outside to see how far the mischief extended, but I felt that something more serious had happened below, and the rain went on in a continuous deluge literally for hours. I heard its never-ceasing downpour long after I had thrown myself upon the bed, tired and fevered, and I heard it still going on, when, after a heavy sleep, I awoke, to find by my watch it was past noon.

Sleeping again, you will say; of course the whole affair is a dream and nothing else.

Wait a little, we shall see.

Some commotion was taking place in the house. Hurrying footsteps and quick-speaking voices reached my ear from below stairs, and going some way down, I hailed the *concierge*, who was amongst the group of people gathered on the lower landing. He came up to me, with a pale face and scared eyes.

"Monsieur has not heard?" he exclaimed. "Ah, no! Indeed, then, monsieur must have been sleeping soundly. A terrible calamity has happened—the lightning has struck Madame's balcony here on the *quatrième*, and demolished it. How its remains hold together still is a marvel; most of it has fallen and the rest must soon follow."

"Madame is not hurt, I hope?" I asked anxiously.

"No, by God's mercy, no one is hurt!" he answered. "And now that the storm has abated, workmen will arrive to repair and prevent farther danger. But monsieur will be well advised not to trust himself on his own balcony. It has no support from below at one end—one of the columns has disappeared.

This was the fact, and with the destruction of the ironwork had disappeared the evidence of what I had done to save the lady from falling into that trap set by the rejected suitor.

Once more, you will say, here is further proof that I had been dreaming. I can show you nothing to the contrary, you will declare. Perhaps not, but the lady was no dream, for I saw her twice again—the next day and the next.

And the next was for the last time, for when I last looked on that fair face and form, it was lying stretched out on some planks in the shed which, at Lucerne, did duty for the morgue, dead! Drowned? Yes, recovered from the lake, but not drowned to death, as a deep wound from the blade of a poignard, in the region of the heart, only too plainly testified.

Some peasants that same day, towards nightfall, had seen the body floating near the town, and pushing out in a boat, had brought it ashore. No suspicion of foul play was at first aroused, but a little later a man was observed on the bank by a gendarme, washing a long knife stained with blood. This circumstance, in conjunction with the discovery of the poor woman, which of course had caused great excitement throughout the community, led to his apprehension, and as I was leaving the shed, I met the prisoner being taken to the place, under a strong guard, in order to confront him with the victim—a customary proceeding according to the Continental system of criminal investigation. One glance at the accused was sufficient for me: I immediately recognized the tall, lithe Italian!

Some six months later he was executed at Berne.

